

# VISION

OF TOMORROW

FEBRUARY 5/-



## After Ragnarok

Temple • Priest • Wodhams

S. A. FOX

# VISION

OF TOMORROW

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*Editor:* PHILIP HARBOTTLE

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*Editorial Address:* RONALD E. GRAHAM (PUBLISHERS) PTY LTD., 2 ST. NICHOLAS BUILDINGS, NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, ENGLAND. Telephone: Newcastle 26804.

This issue of VISION OF TOMORROW marks an important occasion for both ourselves and our readers. Our regular followers will know that our first issue was launched last Autumn, when we became Britain's (and the Commonwealth's) only original science fiction magazine.

In those early issues we published the best science fiction stories that were currently available. Our magazine was welcomed by many writers who had hitherto been working in a vacuum, who were writing science fiction without any particular market in mind, most of their stories being offered to America. The advent of our magazine, therefore, presented them with a positive home market for the first time in many years.

Our magazine was also welcomed by many readers who—justifiably—felt that they were being deprived of much creative science fiction writing by those same authors. Many letters and helpful suggestions have poured into our editorial office, stemming from our Merit Award system. And it is through these letters that both editor and writer have been made aware of what type of story our readers prefer. Accordingly, many stories are being written especially for our vocal readership. Make no mistake; VISION OF TOMORROW is *your* magazine. Only with your continued support can we continue to publish the kind of original science fiction you prefer.

With this issue we are proud to feature a fine array of stories that have been especially written for us. We bring you such famous authors as William F. Temple and Jack Wodhams. Such popular contributors as Sydney J. Bounds, Dan Morgan and Philip E. High are presenting new material which we are confident our readers will enjoy. We are especially pleased to welcome Douglas R. Mason to our pages, and also to welcome back the young Australian writer, Damien Broderick. We also introduce an exciting newcomer, Robert Bowden. Walter Gillings continues his fascinating story, which is pleasing both old and new enthusiasts alike.

We ask you to continue supporting our magazine. Especially do we ask you to keep on writing, telling us what you enjoy and what you do not enjoy. In this way our publisher, myself, and our contributors can continue to strive to provide you with the finest science fiction entertainment. We think this issue is our best yet—but in the aim for perfection there is still room for improvements. After reading this issue, we hope you will write to us with your comments and suggestions.

*Philip Harbottle*

# DINNER OF HERBS

DOUGLAS R. MASON

The tune, stereo-beamed, so that it followed her about, as though with a living presence of its own, was an old one; but then the emotion had been around for a long time and it fitted her mood well enough.

In spite of herself, she had suspended judgement. Rational and critical areas were out of phase.

In fact, Fenella hummed along with it for a bar or two and even did a slow, soft-shoe routine across the dining space to the panoramic window, which filled one wall of the apartment on the seaward side.

As magic casements went, it opened on no perilous sea. The shallow lagoon was as civilised as a Willow-pattern plate.

Both palms against the plexiglass, she looked out on a diminishing succession of islands, each filled to the water's edge with discreetly-sited villas, like the one she was in.

But for all practical purposes, she could feel that she was the only observer. Subtle planning had fixed it that no part of a block overlooked another in the same cluster. The illusion of personal isolation was complete.

Conditioned to urban concentration, where only the know-how of the environmental engineer stood between the human rat and psychological despair, she saw the vista as a novel, open-ended question and shared with Cortez, a wild surmise at so much distance.

It added a small harmonic of insecurity to sensibilities already quickened by the a-typical situation she was in.

Having made a more direct trip from the dianetics lab, where she earned her dole of community credit, she had arrived first at the trust. Strictly, Gordon Reid ought to have been doing the vigil bit and she ought to have had the edge by making an entrance. As a professional thought chandler, the implications were clearer to her than most. Nothing was more important in the early stages of a relationship than the correct, mental set.

Also, she was not too gone on the general-purpose android which went with the homestead and had been hovering about with a surfeit of zeal ever since she arrived.

Maybe she was just over-sensitive, but the bland, oval head seemed to mask a sardonic intelligence that was watching and judging every move she made. It was

altogether too fresh and had a knowing look, in its multi-faceted eye, which would have gotten it on report for psychological trespass if it had been flesh and blood.

As it was, she was only waiting for Gordon to check in to have him switch it off.

The soft scuff of foam-soled boots disturbed the free-wheeling association of thought. It was in her midst again. She asked sharply, 'What is it? I did not call you.'

An unctuous voice, with a strain of false servility, answered from half a metre away. So near, that she had to control an involuntary bid to jump clear. It had come closer than robot regs allowed on its own initiative. But the words were civil enough, though with an odd archaic twist, as if it was making an in-joke for its own amusement. 'What does Fenella lack? Only say and I will hasten to oblige. A willing heart makes light of labour.'

Cheeky with it, too. Using her name like that. Must have picked it up from the registration details on the punched tag of her travel bag.

'Nothing. Return to your pantry. Stay there.'

She turned again to her window in curt dismissal.

Whether it was deliberate or whether it was just an excess of willingness to oblige, when it pivoted away, a hand rested momentarily on the centre of her back. She distinctly felt three fingers and an opposed thumb, in a light pressure that might have been a confidential pat.

From the door, it delivered a parting thought. 'Do not mistake the beating of your heart for the hoofbeats of an approaching friend.'

Female logic blamed Gordon Reid. Why was he so tardy? The time disk on the house-management console was showing eighteen-hundred hours. Another hour and it would be dark. In spite of the claim that music was the food of love, she was hungry.

Still, she had no wish to see the android again. Give Gordon another half hour. Prompt at 1830, call a shuttle and have it take her to the terminal. Get a meal at the diner and catch the twenty-hundred I.B.C. to the city.

Even letting in the possibility, was a sizeable disappointment. She went into the bedroom, navigated round a large, circular divan and looked at herself in a full-length pier glass.

Honey-coloured hair, tied plainly back in a flimsy

bow of amethyst chiffon; crotch-length, black and silver chain mail dress over a fine, one-piece body stocking in pale cadmium yellow; she looked like a trim, coloured nude in a bespoke net.

Preoccupied, in smoothing her hands in self-love over her hips, she missed the opening of the door below and once again heard a voice unexpectedly close at hand.

Not so very near. Gordon Reid was at the bedroom door asking a party of the second part if she had arrived.

At the back of her mind, she registered that the android must have been watching her from the door; but the small fact was unimportant. The weekend was suddenly viable. Familiar human tones made continuity with her past. She called out, 'In here, Gordon. I'm in here.'

The android could have told her that nothing is as the mind expects it to be. In the city, surrounded by people, only meeting in public, they had known a special intimacy, an awareness of each other that was free from any embarrassment. Now they were alone, there was a constraint. Communication was harder and not easier.

Gordon Reid fell back on grooming talk. Said he had had one hell of a time getting away. There had been a call for a section conference, which he could not duck and it had taken him beyond the time for the I.B.C. he was scheduled to catch. Then his deputy had been acting up, as if he suspected there was something unusual going on.

'What do engineers find to have conferences about?'

'No sneers at the men who provide your daily bread. Without the honest engineer there wouldn't be a society for witch-doctors to ferret about in.'

'Are you calling me a witch?'

'The most attractive there is. You don't wear that about the halls and covered ways of Camelot. You look nice enough to eat.'

In the dialogue they had gotten themselves at either end of a diameter of the free-standing divan and Fenella was conscious of the awkwardness of it. Any move round the perimeter, unless judiciously phased, would look like a sequence on an Attic vase. The thought brought a pleasing flush of colour, rising like a tide from her neck.

Engineers being familiar with crisis action and aware that the shortest distance from A to B was a straight line, Gordon Reid stepped nimbly to the trampoline and was half way across its springy, three-metre spread, going well, when the android spoke from inside the door.

'When you are ready, sir, I will busy myself about the evening meal. Handsome is as handsome does.'

Unlike Fenella, Reid had no area of doubt about the place of a few kilos of assorted alloy and boudoirs were definitely not listed. He stopped in mid step, changed direction and bore down on the tin man.

'What is it, sir? I hope I give every satisfaction. The labourer is worthy of his hire.'

Reid knocked it twice on the side of its dome with a balled fist in the best tradition of a maintenance expert. Somewhere, deep inside, a taut cable went resonant on orchestral A and the ovoid head circled twice in a ploy that seemed set on screwing itself off.

Reid said, 'How long since you were in for service?'

'Within the year, sir.'

'You should know better than to leave your box until you're called.'

'True sir. I am only anxious to make you comfortable. They also serve who only stand and wait. That is my basic programme. Will that be all, sir?'

'That's more than enough. Get the hell out of here. No. Wait. Since you mention it, I believe you can go to work on a meal. What do you have?'

'There is a standard menu, sir. In this out-of-the-way place, we depend entirely on the recycling plant. But better a dinner of herbs where love is. It is always very well received.'

'Go to it then. Work those little metal fingers to the core.'

'Sir?'

'Get out.'

Fenella said, 'I was going to tell you about that android. I don't like it. It gives me the green creeps. I believe it's suffering from identity confusion. It looks at me in a very peculiar way.'

'That's a rare compliment. Even a poor, metal beast is under the spell.'

'You are *suave* for an engineer.'

'That's the second time you've taken a swipe at my honourable profession. You must have been frightened by one in your incubator.'

'I was very glad to see you.'

'Was? What's all this *was*?'

'Well, *am* then.'

Reid had moved within touching distance and did just that. Both hands on the silky net at her shoulders, he looked down into wide, brown eyes that were almost all pupil. The pink tide, which had ebbed, flooded again and ran definitively along her cheekbones.

He pulled her towards him and bent his head. Lips very soft, a relaxed and open O. A warm tunnel to escape the world in.

For a time, only. He wondered, briefly, if they would get away with it. At their grades, there were still two years to go before a pairing contract would be considered. This accommodation was on allocation to his precinct chief and by chance he had learned that it would not be in use for the next seven days.

Provided they were back in good time and came into the city from different directions, he could not see that there was any danger of being found out. They had both covered their tracks.

Behind his back, there was a deprecatory cough. The android was at it again. 'Sir, I am truly sorry to curtail your pleasure. But necessity knows no law. I have a problem.'

Reid said nastily, 'It will be your last for some time.'

We can manage without you. Think your last big thought, you are about to be switched to Non-Op.'

'That is as you please, sir, of course. He who pays the piper calls the tune. But there is a fault in the dispenser. Until it is cleared, there will be no meal. I suggest that you give me your identity serial, which I can use to call out a service detail from the mainland.'

'Where is this fault?'

'The panel shows it to be in the recycling plant. It has happened before. Our system is due for renewal. It will not take many minutes to clear.'

'Hold fast on that call. I'll take a look myself. Do you know how to get to it?'

'Of course, sir. If you will follow I will show you.'

Fenella said, 'Why not let the maintenance crew do it?'

'Probably it wouldn't matter. But I don't want a charge on my credits registered from here. Some beady-minded computer might just throw it up for a back check. I'm supposed to be in the Adirondacks. Just set your regulator for a slow simmer and I'll be back before you can recite a *sutra*.'

'What *sutra* did you have in mind?'

'Anything short, beamed on the pleasure principle.'

'I do love you.'

'That is as it should be. I'll be back before you know.'

The android led through the small kitchen to a landing with a stairwell and an elevator cage, slid back the trellis and stood respectfully aside for his betters to go first. His busy circuitry was setting up a hum that came through the acoustic padding strength nine and Reid stopped to put his ear to the smooth panel on its chest.

'The recycling gear isn't the only mechanism on the blink. Cool it or you'll blow every fuse in your cortex. How far down?'

'Only four levels, sir. This is only a small villa.'

'Other apartments will be without the protein staple.'

'I imagine so, sir. But first come first served, they will have used up the reserve. They have not your reasons for delay.'

'What do you mean by that?'

'Just an observation, sir. Beauty draws more than oxen.'

'Keep your observations to yourself.'

'Of course, sir. If you say so I will be mute as a mackerel, though a good maxim is never out of season.'

'It's out of season as of now.'

There was no doubt about it, the android was running out of kilter. Once this job was done, it could be homed on its sentry box and switched to an indefinite wait.

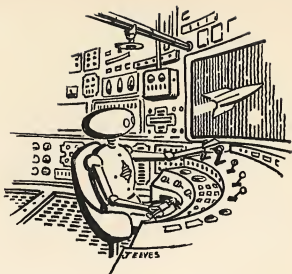
Reid spent the few seconds of the descent checking its specification plate.

'You're not a general-purpose unit?'

'No, sir. I have had a chequered career. For some years I worked in an experimental psychology lab. Aesthetic choice investigation. I believe there was some adaptation of my circuitry.'

'How did you fetch up here?'

'It is a long story, sir.'



'Don't be evasive with me.'

'Here we are, sir. Just a short step along this corridor.'

Gordon Reid let it go. There was more to do in a hard-won forty-eight hours than chat up a tin man. He watched the android deftly unclip a wall panel and followed into a conduit where they both had to stoop. The android adjusted height by sinking its torso and went ahead like a splay-foot duck.

Air, heavy with a scent of chlorophyll moved Reid to reckon that he had perhaps been foolish. Some of these systems could be tricky. If the additives were in a snarl there could be lethal gas about. Maintenance crews would seal up in protective gear as a routine measure. Maybe, anyway, he would have to call them in.

'Here it is, sir.'

The android was working again on the cladding and heaved away a curved, inspection cover.

Reid came alongside and looked in. At this point, there had been no separation of the waste. It had been sterilised and roughly chopped into a lumpy sludge. Later, all the organic matter would be diverted for final processing into the protein block which could be handled by the dispensers for food simulates.

Currently there was a hold up. A heavy pulveriser was poised ready to stamp into the conveyor. An eccentric cam, which should be engaging was turning slowly on its shaft and missing a vital pawl by a hairsbreadth.

First reaction was surprise that it should have happened. There was no logical reason why it should slip out of engagement. But the remedy was plain enough and relief that it was, after all, an easy assignment stopped further critical gloss. An adjustment lever, set above the shaft in the far wall, was obviously the means to move it down into contact.

Reid edged in and made a long arm to reach over, arching his body to avoid the pestle as it would fall. He had his hand on the grip, when the android neatly kicked his feet from under him and dropped him to the conveyor.

Instinctively, he tightened his hold on the lever and his falling weight shifted it to operate the pawl.

The android watched the rhythmic rise and fall of the hammer for a count of ten, flexing up and down on its telescopic legs in mechanical empathy. Its cortex threw up the observation that a man falls to the side to which he leans. Looking at it from every angle, it was prepared to accept that there was a lot of truth in it.

When the conveyor began to move on, it replaced the hatch and shuffled back the way it had come.

Fenella was considering whether or not she should have played harder to get. A little stylised flight and pursuit was the right pattern for a satisfactory relationship. Give the aggression-submission factor a chance to bubble along.

The theme tune was in the pipe again. A vocalist was giving it blue velvet treatment. 'Lover come back to me.'

A good sentiment, there. Where was he? Gotten himself involved in a close work study no doubt.

After twenty minutes, she went into the kitchen and had to side-step to avoid the android coming out.

'Where is Mr. Reid?'

'I could not say with any truth, M'iss.'

'Now you are being stupid. He was with you.'

'Not any more. I believe he decided to return to his city. There was a man on the stairs from one of the other apartments who seemed to know him. They spoke for a minute or two, out of my hearing. After that, he went quickly to catch the last L.B.C. service. He did not take his overnight bag.'

'But what did he say?'

'I want to tell you that he had to go and not to try to contact him. He will contact you.'

'Why didn't you come straight away to tell me?'

'I know my place. You have made it clear that you do not wish me to approach you. Now the dispenser is working I was about to announce that I can prepare your meal.'

Fenella went thoughtfully back to her window. The switch in the advertised programme was so complete that she was out of ideas. One piece of information stuck in her mind. He had caught the last L.B.C. shuttle. She was stranded in the outback until the morning.

It was quite dark on the lagoon. Filagree light from distant villas sent elongated reflections in a shimmer. Surely, he could have taken time to come back and explain? It argued that in spite of the intimacy of the last weeks and all the apparent common ground, they were basically strangers. Communication, finally, was not on. She had made herself ridiculous. The sooner she got back, the better. It would take more than fair words to wrinkle her off the barrier reef again.

Behind her, the android gave a sympathetic cough and shuffled forward holding a glass. 'Life is a bumper filled by fate. Perhaps you would like a drink, while I bring your meal. Do not distress yourself. Time is the great healer.'

She accepted it, automatically. A meal, anyway, seemed like a good idea. It had been all go since she

had checked out of the lab in the morning and there had been no time to eat.

Whatever the barman had fixed was doing nothing but good. Colours were intense, hard-edged. When light levels dropped sharply, she had no sense of alarm and thought that the seven-branched candelabra, which the android had set on the dining table, was an improvement to the set. It was no bad thing to be alone. In its way, it was an interesting experience.

At the table, there was a second glass and the therapy took a nudge along.

Simple, it might be; but the food was a credit to the chemist who had calibrated the dispenser. Country-style soup, full of flavour, and a heart-shaped outlet of nutty texture, delicately seasoned with herbs.

She had almost worked through it, when her teeth met on a foreign body with a jar that ran seismographically to every bone in her head. Even the euphoria of a third drink could not smooth out the grievance. She called icily for the waiter.

'What's this then. You ought to take more care. There's a dangerous piece of metal in the food. Look.'

Fenella held it out on a two-pronged fork. It was a circular artifact, on a one-centimetre diameter. The candlelight glittered on it. Raised marks on its surface were underlined by the angle of light and shadow. It was very like one of the indestructible identity disks carried by all hands.

The scientific spirit surfaced through the fumes of wine and she dropped it in a handy finger bowl as one panning for gold.

When it was clean and lying on her palm, she read off the small print as though to a table companion. 'Gordon Reid. Executive Engineer. 58/P/129/Fk.'

Fenella stood up and her chair fell on its back. She opened her mouth to scream; but her mind caught up on the wider applications and balked at accepting where it stood. Her knees sagged and the android shuffled forward to make a neat catch before she hit the parquet.

Making intelligent use of skills, the android deftly unclipped its left hand and substituted a general purpose shear. Then it started in at the centre of the neck and began to snip the taut fabrics on a mathematically exact line of division, taking simple pleasure in the way they peeled elastically aside like the skin of a plump fruit.

It began to hum a tune to itself, a little out of key. When it was through with the unpacking chore, and, in its own words, the subject was 'Nude as any needle', it traded the shear for a round, membranous pad with fine micro-filaments of crystal whisker. Then it began to touch. Texture and shape in infinite variety. A recording tape of its professional, considered judgements began to extrude from a slot where a human researcher would have carried a right ear.

It said in a tone of absolute conviction, 'The vices of leisure are dispersed by occupation.'

# TECHNICAL WIZARD



PHILIP E. HIGH

They were a warrior race and vastly experienced. Discovery, reconnaissance and subsequent attack were now routine procedures within the adaptable framework of past experience.

The Empire, the scouts reported, consisted of forty planets contained within an area of some seven hundred cubic light years, widely dispersed and difficult to defend.

Subsequent events were again routine. Information was needed as to the technical development and industrial/military potential of the life-form. In brief, the experts needed a ship to study and a live prisoner from whom such information could be extracted.

The invaders were far too experienced to check this newly discovered empire with instruments. An intelligence capable of constructing an empire over supra-light distances would undoubtedly have an alarm system for intruding detector beams.

The specialist vessels waited, their power systems shut down and all but their undetectable supra-antennae functioning. Visually, and to detector screens, the vessels were the familiar rock debris of space.

It was not long before the supra-antennae detected the characteristic 'rippling' of hyperdimensional transit. The alien vessel, according to routine practice, was crossing space in a series of leaps—no organic life-form could endure hyperdimensional travel for more than limited periods.

Computers calculated the nearest 'surface' point and closed in in readiness. When the alien emerged from his brief but prodigious leap through hyper-space, he was hit with precise skill from all angles.

A 'pusher-beam' overloaded the motors and blew out his electrical circuits, an 'inhibitor' froze the emergency system. At the same time, a 'paralyzer' capable of 'freezing' the nervous system of any conceivable organic life-form passed completely through the ship.

The experts were inside the vessel before the tow-back had even begun. The single alien it contained was transferred to one of the specialist ships and the team began their work.

The team were all experts and all veterans. It was not long before they had mastered control and the vessel was again moving under its own power.

They were not happy about it. Tails twitched nervously and fur was spiky.

'It requires,' said one of the leading technicians, rather obviously, 'five crew members to run this vessel efficiently but a single alien was controlling it alone!'

Another expert emerged from the after part of the ship. 'It's old,' he announced gloomily. 'Metallurgic tests and other research suggest that this vessel has been laid up for a hundred and fifty cycles or so.'

'What do you conclude from that?'

'Sir, my task is collect data, but, it appears to me, that this vessel was dug up and fitted up just for this run. Some of the replacements are jury-rigged for a limited period only. The vessel may have got where she was going but would never have made the journey back.'

'That's not all.' The speaker was a weapon expert. 'This vessel's armaments, at a rough estimate, out-ranges our own by four to one and has ten times the destructive power. Further, if the alien used his instruments at all, he must have recognised us for what we were, all the search and observation instruments incorporate penetrator devices.'

It was then that someone came in from the forward part of the ship. 'In the name of the Great Constructor, come and look at this. I have just switched on one of the minor subsidiary screens—'

They crowded in behind him and stopped, staring, the fur rising in ruffs round their necks.

The screen said, in large lighted letters: TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN. THE SECTOR OF SPACE YOU ARE NOW APPROACHING IS AN *INFECTED AREA*. KEEP CLEAR . . .

The prisoner had been transferred to the Command Ship and Feen, the chief interrogator, eyed it with distaste. According to the medical reports, it was male and approaching its prime. It was also furless, tailless and puny. Constructed fabric covered its body, leaving only the head and naked hands exposed. Coarse, close-cropped black hair covered the upper scalp but the features and ears were without covering.

Feen thought that creature looked weak and would probably collaborate with only initial resistance, if any. Feen was not pleased by his own assessment. He had some exquisitely subtle devices to break resistance and a veritable pharmacopoeia of persuasive drugs to fall back on. In short, he liked interrogation to be intense and protracted.

'Bring in the interpreter.' He waited impatiently while technicians attached electrodes and contact pads to various parts of the prisoner's head and body.

'Switch on.'

'If it pleases you, sir—'

'I said "switch on." Any observations or opinions may be included in your routine report.'

'Yes, sir, as you command, sir.'

There was a click and Feen turned to the prisoner. 'Do you understand me?'

'I understand you.'

Feen made a satisfied purring noise, the mechanical interpreter was functioning efficiently for once. He approached a little closer. 'You must understand from the beginning that you are our prisoner. We shall ask you a number of questions. If you answer these questions truthfully, you will be well treated. If you do not answer these questions, we have methods of forcing you to do so. Alternatively, lies, evasions or misrepresentations will register on certain of our instruments—do you quite understand?'

'I understand.'

'What is your name?'

'That is a test question obviously—Smith—Leonard Smith.'

'You will assist in this matter if you confine yourself to direct answers. What is your race?'



'The Human race or men—take your pick.'  
'How many planets in your colonised empire?'  
'Forty.'  
'Your numbers?'  
'Around nine billion.'  
'Far fewer than we estimated—how many ships?'  
'None now—you have it.'  
Feen glanced disbelievingly at the instruments but there was no fluctuation suggesting a lie. 'You have other means of transport?'

'Yes.'  
'Matter transmission?'  
'Not as you understand it, no.'  
'How do you know how I understand it?'  
'You understand it according to your technology, in mechanical terms.'

Feen decided he was getting out of his depth, technical details could come later.

'If you have only one ship, what were you doing in it—some special mission?'

'Yes. I was taking the route along which you had dispersed your disguised special vessels.'

'For what reason?'

'In order to be taken prisoner and interrogated.'

'Why?' Feen stopped his tongue lolling by an effort of will but his tail twitched twice betrayingly.

'To warn you off.'

'Militarily?'

'Compassionately. You could not occupy our empire and survive. It is an infected area.'

'With what is it infected?'

The alien's lips parted in what, all too obviously, was a smile. 'Us,' he said.

Feen lashed his tail angrily. 'You jest!'

'You think so? Check your instruments. Oh, and by the way, the translating part of your device is not working. Your technicians tried to tell you but you wouldn't listen—'

The various reports, carefully summarised, finally reached the desk of the Supreme Commander, Gelthru. He was disturbed by what he read but far too experienced to make a move without consulting his advisors.

'In my opinion,' he said, 'this alleged "infection" may be discounted. It is, I am inclined to think, a minor propaganda device in an over-all defensive manoeuvre. On the other hand, technically, they are our superiors. They had familiarised themselves both with our language and intentions long before our scout ships reported their existence.'

'Again, the reports on the vessel, confirm superiority both in armament and motive power. I am given to understand that such vessels are no longer employed and we must, therefore, assume matter transmission over supra-light distances. Such an assumption, of course, places their development several hundred cycles ahead of our own. I do not think, despite our immense reserves, we can afford to proceed without reference to the Supreme Council. I suggest, therefore, that a supra-space television link is established with base imme-



diately. I suggest that the alien be placed before the screen and made to repeat his statements. Such a move will place the onus of decision upon the Supreme Council and not upon ourselves.'

He paused and licked his lips meaningly. 'Further, and for my own satisfaction, I should like to question this alien personally. It appears to me, that certain questions have yet to be asked and, to this over-confident alien, certain facts made clear—'

When the prisoner was led in later, Feen, rather ostentatiously led the procession. Gelthru avoided meeting his eye. Feen was a necessary evil but the Supreme Commander found him psychologically and physically repulsive.

He studied the alien briefly. Puny, yes. Unprepossessing but not without a curious dignity.

'Human, you have made claims that your reasons for—I quote—"warning us off" are altruistic rather than politically defensive. I suggest, therefore, you try and convince us. Before you attempt to do so, however, I must remind you of a few facts. First, we are aware of your technical superiority. We have met and defeated superior technologies many times in our history. Usually they perished from exhaustion. Observe the screen please, note the endless rows of combat vessels and that is but *one* unit of our war fleet. Bear it in mind that we are a warrior race, prepared to absorb all you can throw at us while we master your superiority. Numerically, we can overwhelm you in production and fire-power. Consider this carefully before you answer.'

The human smiled a little wearily. 'A warrior race—a race of extroverts. You do not believe we can be concerned as to your safety. Your minds interpret the warning as an ingenious device to avoid direct contact. In short, you require a show of force, a demonstration.'

He paused and sighed again. 'Your guards have side-arms, order them to kill me.'

Gelthru's long green eyes narrowed briefly then he made a gesture with a furry hand. 'Kill him.'

The side-arms were flaring and spectacular but the human refused to add drama. Instead of standing nobly erect with folded arms, he stood limply and disinterestedly while the blue and white energy discharges splashed noisily against him.

When they had finished, he snapped his fingers and the lights went out. He snapped them again and they came on.

He pointed at the screen. 'First ship in line.' It winked out of existence. 'I could wipe out your entire fleet single-handed.' He waited for the words to sink in, then pointed again. 'I will not do so.' Suddenly the ship was back in line.

He smiled at them tiredly. 'A force screen and an ingenious series of mental illusions. Take a lot of convincing, don't you? Try something else?'

There was a curious swooshing sound and an odd sort of impact. Guards and watchers surged back, neck-fur in startled ruffs and fangs bared in alarm.

The human did not appear triumphant, only weary. 'Check with second class vessel 9952, this one is missing from their armoury.'

An unnerved technician, froth dripping from his long pink tongue made the necessary call.

After a brief pause, he said: 'The captain reports device No. 77/48 is missing from the bomb bay, sire.'

The human pointed. 'Check the number.'

A guard, fur spiky and tail rigid, approached the squat, bronze-coloured missile cautiously. 'Seven seven, stroke, four eight,' he read out.

The human said: 'Excellent. I could have activated it, you know, here or on the parent vessel. Think about it.'

There was a hollow, splashing sound and the device vanished. There was an audible sigh of relief but Gelthru kept his self-control.

He waited for his vessel to report the return of the device, then he said, reasonably. 'Personally, I am convinced, but there is an enigma in your demonstration. In brief, such a demonstration of force requires no support—why the added story of an infection?'

The human shook his head tiredly. 'You still do not understand—we are the infection. A few generations hence, confident in new forced technologies, you will try again unless we can convince you now.'

He looked directly at Gelthru. 'You are well informed and, for a soldier, imaginative. Tell me, Commander, does your race encourage the examination of nuclear devices by the very young?' He did not wait for the answer. 'You, your race and your empire of two hundred and thirty worlds will be in precisely the position of the very young if you proceed against us—we are infected. We, too, were once a warrior race but a hundred and eighty cycles ago we became parapsychic.'

He paused and smiled grimly. 'Allow me to tear to pieces the comforting picture in your minds. You visualise I am sure, the development of such minor assets as clairvoyance, precognition and, possibly, telepathy. Powers of the mind which, you assure yourselves, will benefit the race and further your military aims. You imagine, as we did, that you will command these powers. The reverse is true—they will command you.'

He smiled bitterly. 'Oh, yes, I can vanish like this—and re-appear so—but I don't know how I do it, consider that. Consider if you please, what happened to us. Out of eighty-seven billion, nine billion remain and we the survivors, have yet to learn to live with our talents.

Our suicide rate once hit the appalling figure of three thousand eight hundred a week.'

He paused and his body seemed to sag tiredly. 'Perhaps you are saying to yourselves, we can handle this. It's merely a question of control, of will power and of balance. Permit me to tell you what will happen should you be so incredibly stupid as to proceed—

'One day you will awake and waking be oddly conscious of change. You will be aware of the world in which you live but also aware of another. Another plane of existence which you can feel about you but cannot define. It is almost visual but not quite, like something you discern from the corner of your eye but cannot focus in time. When one looks there is nothing but one is always half-seeing it.

'One realises slowly that privacy has gone, always there are things watching, noting, crowding around.

'You, as individuals, will say to yourselves, as we did: "I am depressed this morning, it is nothing, it will pass"; only it doesn't. Then you will think to yourselves "nerves, need a holiday, wish I were on the beach somewhere—"

*'Quite suddenly you will be!*

'If you are a balanced personality, you will look at the sea and the sun. You will lift the sand in your hands to make sure it's real and try to fight down the terror inside you. How did I get here? I was in bed!

'The weak will run in circles, vanishing and re-appearing and many of them will vanish forever. The rare, the strong and reasoning ones, will grip their control with both hands and, after the initial shock, experiment and reason. "I am here, I must have got here somehow. What was I thinking—ah, yes. Suppose I reverse the process—?"

*'Back in bed!*

'Did it ever happen? I only thought—

*'Back on the beach!* And sweating, "supposing I had thought—no—NO!"

'Many, did not think "no" in time.

'Even in a parapsychic society, the mentally well balanced—the strong—survive. So I can teleport or, more aptly, if I do not keep considered control of my thinking processes I am liable to be teleported regardless. Telepathy? Of course, you are an open receiver, the suicidal contemplations of your next door neighbour, the malevolent envy of a supposedly good friend—after five years, perhaps, you'll be learning to shut some of it out. On the other hand, you realise that your nearest neighbours see you stripped of your superficial charm, mentally you're naked.'

He paused and looked directly at the Supreme Commander. 'Think of something on your home planet, preferably not a living intelligence, something you like which you cannot obtain here.'

Gathru thought only briefly and said: 'Grilled *Fleg*, it's a small fish peculiar to certain lakes on my home world—'

There was a watery kind of impact and Gelthru found himself staring unbelievably at a perfectly cooked

*Fleg*, still steaming, garnished with *froth* and ready for eating in its special cooking salver.

The Supreme Commander's fangs showed, then he pushed it carefully to one side. He no longer relished it.

The human raised his shoulders slightly. 'It's perfectly edible—no doubt some unfortunate diner on your home world is wondering who snatched his dinner from under his nose. I did not create it, you must understand. It had to come from somewhere. This brings me to my next point. Like all races, we had our blind idiot-men. "I want a million", and suddenly, the room half filled with money. That, too, had to come from somewhere. How long do you think our economy survived that sort of thing?

'Precognition? Certainly. How long before one circles the inevitable question—how long have I to live and how will I die. Does one really want to know the answers to questions like that?

'Perhaps the most dreadful burden of all, however, is the sheer ignorance, the total lack of rational explanation. First, the never-ending need for constant vigilance and then the "why?"

'Inevitably, imagination alone can supply the answer, and unaided by facts, the result is fantasy. You have seen what I can do but, as I have said before, *I don't know how I do it*. Certainly I give mental commands, but *what carries them out?* Is it some power within ourselves or some power beyond ourselves? No one knows. We therefore invent explanations. To one, it is the *Id*, the unconscious mind which has somehow broken free. To another, aware of another plane of existence, it is sheer mysticism, spirit help. To a third, the machinations of an unseen alien invader.

'All of us, however, are compelled to invent *something*, if only to retain our self control and keep our runaway talents within safety limits. I tell myself that I have two unseen helpers who will do my bidding when I command them in a certain way but *only* in a certain way. This fantasy provides certain mental safe-guards and allows me limited relaxation. I can for example dwell idly on the centre of the sun without actually ending up in the middle of it. In the early days, when millions disappeared without trace, I have no doubt that many ended up there. Rationally, I do not believe I have two unseen helpers but I must keep them live in mind from necessity, in order to *survive*.'

He paused, looking at them in a curiously intent way. For a brief but intense moment, they actually *felt* compassion.

'My friends, culturally, you are centuries behind my own race and if you proceed you will do so without hope of survival. We have barely begun to live with our talents, you would have no hope whatever.'

He paused again. 'Perhaps you accept my words, perhaps you do not. Perhaps something will remain to remind you, just one example—'

Abruptly and without warning, he vanished.

It took them some little time to re-orient and to con-

vince themselves that things were still the same. They looked at the place where the human had stood and, furtively, at each other.

Gelthru shook himself mentally and glanced at the screen. It was blank, the supra-space link with Supreme Council had been severed at the far end. No doubt, they were already deciding what to do.

They were. A message arrived moments later.

Gelthru studied it with grim amusement, nothing to commit themselves, of course—

*'You are hereby instructed to move the fleets under your command immediately and to proceed along the following coordinates . . .'*

Gelthru bared his fangs silently. The following coordinates led in the opposite direction.

He was glad, however, that he had thrown the onus of decision upon the Council. He could well have lost the entire fleet or his own head as a penalty for utter defeat. Now he was in the clear.

A thought struck him and he went carefully through the pile of reports. It took some little time but finally he pushed them aside with a faint purr of satisfaction—*the alien prisoner had not been searched nor had one single garment of his clothing been removed and examined.*

No doubt there were good reasons for this, the alien had probably exerted one of his many talents to that very end.

On second thoughts, he would have liked to have written that routine report in full detail. The Council wouldn't care for it but it would have given him immense satisfaction to write it—

*Honoured Sirs,*

*I was compelled to withdraw my entire fleet immediately or sacrifice it uselessly to an alien culture so technically superior to our own that—*

Yes, that was the completely true answer, *technical superiority*. They, the invading force, had spread a net and unfortunately caught a wizard. Gelthru gave a short audible laugh. A technical wizard spawned by a race of technical wizards. No doubt, the mechanisms of that same race had been dispersed skilfully throughout his entire fleet. Their superiority was such that it would be both invisible and undetectable.

These same mechanisms the alien had controlled by micro-units concealed in his garments and upon his person.

Gelthru paused in his musing and a visible shiver ran like a faint wave across his fur. By the Great Constructor, the things they could do with those mechanisms. Matter-transmission over supra-light distances. Matter-transmitters which acted both as transmitters and receivers thus permitting them to snatch objects, selected objects, over galactic distances. The cooked *Fleg* was a typical example.

The most striking demonstration to him, however, was the transporting of the bomb from one vessel to another. To reduce an object as unstable as a nuclear

device to individual atoms, to transport those same atoms and reassemble without fault required a technical mastery beyond imagination.

He leaned back in his chair and permitted himself to laugh aloud. What a showman! What a magnificent showman! And again what an object lesson! The final touch which had driven away the invading forces forever without violence or bloodshed. He laughed again. Certainly scared the face-whiskers off the entire council and, for that matter, the councils of generations to come. No doubt, already the entire sector of space was stamped and over-stamped by various committees: BANNED. DANGEROUS AREA. KEEP CLEAR. INFECTED SECTOR, and so on. Yes, yes, that one puny alien, one technical wizard had put on a staggering show of magic—all done with mirrors of rather an advanced kind.

One thought remained to trouble the Supreme Commander. What the alien meant when he had said: 'Perhaps something will remain to remind you, just one example—'

In another part of the great vessel, Feen, the interrogator, was thinking along much the same lines. His thoughts, however, unlike Gelthru's, held no respect or grudging admiration. Feen's thoughts were malevolent and angry. They had been 'conned'! Certainly the aliens could have beaten them technically—it was a grudging admission which came with some effort—but why the stage show? The answer was obvious, apart from its undoubted effect on the majority—the aliens wanted to make fools of them. A stage show, undertaken for home consumption, they must be splitting their sides with laughter.

The whole unlikely tale of parapsychic development was so full of holes that it was virtually a *net* of fantasy.

Two invisible helpers indeed! A mature story-teller would have been satisfied with one. It was the over-em-

bellishment with its implied contempt which stuck in his throat.

He had one, any fool with only limited education, knew that in the far past when the race had religion, this was the primal belief. For centuries, the priesthood had held the people enslaved by professing personal contact with one's Guardian Angel. It had taken two uprisings and the revolt of the scientists to break that hold. It was said that some still believed in this myth of forty centuries ago.

His thoughts drifted back, recalling the pictures he had seen of the ancient cities, dominated always by the soaring scarlet spires of the Temples of Priests.

Feen shivered, suddenly depressed, he could hear suddenly the screams of the sacrificial victims, the wailing of the watchers.

He pushed the thought hastily out of his mind but somehow, in some odd way, things had changed. He was in the ship but was aware of an odd, somehow sepia-tinted existence, superimposed on his consciousness at the same time.

He lashed his balding tail angrily. Nerves, the whole damn insulting business had somehow got on the top of him. That was another hole in the story, when imagination took rein the stable intelligence didn't crawl under a rock. The stable intelligence faced his internal terrors, challenged them and, if necessary, mocked them to do the worst they dare.

Feen laughed briefly and looked about his quarters. The desk, yes, massive, cobalt-steel and riveted to the floor.

He laughed again and said aloud: 'Come on invisible helper, put it on the ceiling—'

It took only thirty minutes for Feen to go completely and rather noisily insane. Finally his heart failed and he fell into the hole in the floor where his desk had been and his tail twitched only once—



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## **FIFTH COMMANDMENT**

*Order your copy  
now!*

If you see a man walking down the street with a black eye, you can be sure he got it through talking when he should have been listening. (Ancient Irish Axiom).

# Flanagan's Law

DAN MORGAN

Terence Hartigan, captain of the Intersol Corporation freighter *Ladybug*, had the long, sad face of a man who specialised in meeting trouble half-way, but this morning he was grinning as he wiped the depilatory cream from his chin, because *Ladybug* was due to blast-off from Calpryn in five hours' time, fully loaded with a cargo of Gjarl seed for the refineries of Centaur IV. Added to this was the fact that settlement of all fines and law suits incurred during *Ladybug's* stay on Calpryn had amounted to less than 5,000 Credits Galactic, which was something of a record. There had been accident claims from Calprynian stevedores, and half a dozen suits brought by local farmers who claimed that the *Ladybug's* landing had spoiled their weather, but that was perfectly normal on this planet. Hartigan had managed to avoid one of the larger sources of expensive legal trouble by cancelling all planet leave for crew members during the ship's time on Calpryn.

The first Earth ship ever to land on Calpryn was stuck there for nearly two years until a special expedition arrived to bail her out. The reason for this was the fact that litigation seemed to be the main pastime and entertainment of the Calprynians. Their judicial code was a complicated mixture of their own laws and others picked up from a score of different cultures with which they had come into contact. For instance, on Calpryn you could be fined two hundred and fifty credits for sleeping more than twenty paces from your horse—this despite the fact that there were, and never had been, any horses on the planet. It was hardly possible to walk down a Calprynian street without having a writ slapped on you for breathing someone else's air, violating privacy through staring, implied mental adultery, or any of a thousand other offences.

The psychologists of the Solar Alien Relations Agency had come to the conclusion that this obsession with legal conflict was the means by which the Calprynians, an apparently non-violent race, drained off their natural aggressive instincts. This being so, they advised all Earth ships to play along with the legal system game, however crazy it might seem. In a Top Secret memo to the World President, the Director of S.A.R.A. ven-

tured the opinion that should the Calprynians ever abandon their legal shenanigans and start to let off steam in the normal human manner, they could become a menace to the peace of the entire galaxy.

Hartigan zipped up the collar of his crisp blue uniform jacket and walked along the control room whistling softly to himself. His cancellation of planet leave had not been a popular one with the crew, but they would soon forget when they arrived at Centaur IV, where they could release their high spirits safely in a comfortably wide-open society. Hartigan had already decided that he would allow himself a bit of hell-raising in celebration of his success on Calpryn.

'Good morning, gentlemen.'

The officers in the control room clicked to attention, acknowledging his salute. *Ladybug* was a taut ship, well disciplined and efficiently run—apart from one exception, which Hartigan didn't think about more often than was necessary.

'Pre-blastoff checks in hand, Mr. Benson?'

'Aye, sir. The *ship's* all ready,' said the first mate, a short, ramrod backed man with a clipped moustache.

The two lines running from the side of Hartigan's nose to the corners of his mouth deepened. 'How's that, Mr. Benson?'

Benson's moustache twitched. 'One man adrift at roll-call, sir.'

A feeling of impending disaster bunched in the pit of Hartigan's stomach. 'Which man, Mr. Benson?'

'O'Mara, sir.'

'Saints preserve us!' murmured Hartigan, under his breath. O'Mara was his personal cross, a drunken, brawling slob of an engineer third-class, who could be guaranteed to get into trouble on any planet; even worse, he had the reputation of being the mouthiest space-lawyer this side of Antares. Only six months before he had gone AWOL on Deneb IV, and Hartigan hadn't caught up with him before he had wrecked six bars and assaulted half the Denebian police force. It had taken the Earth ambassador himself to straighten out that little caper, and Hartigan received a severe reprimand for failing to control a crew-member.

'Are you sure?' he asked the first mate.

'Aye, sir. I've had the ship searched. He's not on board.'

'Do any of the crew have any idea where he is?' Hartigan asked, clutching at the faint hope.

'With due respect, sir, it seems he was heard talking last night in the crew mess. They say he said: 'The devil with ould Mother Hartigan. I've had me share of being stuck in this can. I'm going out to see what's behind them bright lights''.'

Hartigan shuddered. The quotation had all the earmarks of authentic O'Mara.

'Shall I inform the Port Authority that he's AWOL, sir?' asked Benson.

'No! Don't bring them into it. We must keep this a domestic matter, if we can.'

'Sir?'

'We'll have to find him ourselves and bring him back.'

'With less than five hours to go to blastoff, sir.'

Hartigan flexed his big hands. Another diplomatic incident involving a Ladybug crew member would mean his being hauled up before a SARA committee, who had the power to revoke his captain's ticket on the grounds of incompetence for command.

'Take a ground car and a search party of five men. I want you to comb the city and find that trolch, wherever he is. But for Pete's sake keep out of trouble.'

'I'll do my best, sir,' Benson said dubiously.

'Check in by radio every half-hour. I'll have Communications monitoring the Calprynian police wavelengths for any news of O'Mara. But remember, whatever happens, we must blastoff at 13.00 hours, and we can't do so without him.'

'Aye, sir,' Benson hurried away.

Hartigan rushed through the quickest morning inspection in the history of his command. Nagging at the back of his mind was the memory of the huge posters he had seen plastered all over the city during his trip to the Port Authority building the day before. They carried pictures of the Attorney General of Calpryn, Aran Sith, who was standing for re-election in a week's time. An Attorney General on this planet carried the combined fan appeal of a TV star and sports champion. Crowds of up to a hundred thousand flocked to the Litigation Amphitheatre in Zoshar, the capital city, to see him perform in a big case.

It seemed that there was some doubt about Aran Sith's re-election, because there had been no really sensational cases during the last few months. The fickle public were giving considerable support to a reform candidate who promised bigger and better litigation if elected. Under the circumstances it seemed likely that Aran Sith might be looking for some new attraction to boost his popularity rating and carry the election—and Hartigan had a sick feeling that the trial of an alien spaceman might be just the kind of novelty he was looking for.

He arrived back at the communications room just

after 8.45. 'Has Benson called in yet?'

'No, sir,' said the P.O. 'But we picked this up on the Calprynian police channel.'

Hartigan read the message, his solemn face growing longer.

'Ground car calling in now,' said the operator.

'Put it through on the loudspeaker, and give me a mike,' said Hartigan.

'Benson calling Ladybug...' said the voice of the first mate. 'We're moving south towards the centre of the city, but there's no sign of...'

'Communications have picked up a prowler car call,' interrupted Hartigan. 'A bartender has been assaulted in a joint on the East Side called Yoshi's. You'll find it at map coordinate 88Z. Get over there and pick O'Mara up before the police arrive, if you can.'

'Aye, sir. And if the police are there first?'

'Then let me know, and I'll contact the Port Authority,' Hartigan said. 'Whatever you do, don't tangle with the police yourself.'

There were a thousand and one other things he should have been doing, but Hartigan decided to sweat it out there in the communications room. Benson called in again at 9.15 from the scene of the assault. From the descriptions given by witnesses there was little doubt that the culprit had been O'Mara. But the man had disappeared. It seemed incredible that a six-foot-four Irishman in spaceman's uniform, with bright red hair to boot, could merge with the landscape in a city of hairless, pink-skinned aliens.

'Try every bar and clip joint you can find,' Hartigan ordered. 'O'Mara has got to be there somewhere.' He slammed the mike down and began to pace the deck. Minutes dragged by, the scheduled blastoff time coming closer.

Benson called in at 9.45 to report a blank half-hour's searching.

'Keep trying,' snarled Hartigan.

At 10.10 communications picked up another Calprynian police call. An unidentified alien had stolen a taxi from outside a hotel on the East Side, and was driving west in a drunken manner. O'Mara for sure.

At 10.12 a police call reported that the taxi had crashed through the window of a department store in the city centre. No one had been injured, but in the confusion the driver, a red-headed alien in a spaceman's uniform, had managed to escape. Prowler cars from all points were converging on the area.

Hartigan tensed himself like a man waiting for the sky to fall, and waited. Nothing further came through. Somehow, O'Mara must have managed to break through the cordon.

Benson missed calling in at 10.15. In his desperation Hartigan took this as a hopeful sign. The mate must be too hot on the scent of the fugitive to waste time talking on the radio.

At 10.40 there was an official call from the Director of the Port Authority, a Calprynian thin as a bean pole, with a mean, hyper-thyroid eye.

'Good morning, Captain Hartigan. I understand that a party of your men has driven into Zoshar in a ground car. May I enquire the purpose of this expedition?'

'A special privilege sight-seeing party,' Hartigan said, hopefully.

'Indeed?' The Calprynian raised hairless brows. 'I trust they will enjoy their brief visit. I hope you haven't forgotten that Port Regulations require an examination of all your crew members by our medical director at 12.00 hours?'

'They'll be here,' Hartigan said.

'I hope so,' said the official acidly. 'Their absence would entail a delay in your blastoff, causing you to fail to comply with your Clearance Certificate. The penalty for such an infringement is a fine of 2,000 Credits Galactic for each hour's delay, or part thereof.'

'I'll bear that in mind,' said Hartigan, with a sickly smile. He turned to the P.O. as the screen faded. 'Anything more from Benson?'

'No, sir.'

Hartigan glanced at the wall clock. One hour and ten minutes to go to the medical inspection, and only another hour after that to the scheduled blastoff time.

'What the devil do you want?' he bawled, as a young lieutenant hurried in and threw a sloppy salute.

'Time for pre-blastoff inspection of the engine room, sir,' said the lieutenant nervously.

'All right, let's go.' Hartigan marched towards the door, calling to the communications PO over his shoulder. 'Get in touch with me the minute anything comes through on O'Mara.'

In the engine room he found a harrassed Chief Engineer engaged in an argument with two green-suited Calprynians of the official class.

'What's going on here?' he demanded.

'They're from the Radioactive Metals Commission,' explained the chief. 'There's been some mixup about that fuel we took on. We should have obtained a special export permit before loading. Without it, we're liable to prosecution under some screwball Conservation of Resources Act.'

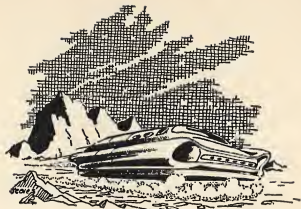
'But I signed the forms yesterday,' protested Hartigan.

'That is quite possible,' said one of the officials, who had a long, pink nose, sharp as a needle. 'But those were merely applications, which have to be processed. The permit should have been forwarded to you by the Department of Fuel and Power. It must then be produced to the inspecting officers of the Radioactive Metals Commission, myself and my colleague, for countersigning.'

'Do you know anything about this?' Hartigan turned to the quivering lieutenant.

'Some official documents came in by messenger this morning, sir. I think they're still on your desk.'

Hartigan hurried to his office, followed by the Calprynian officials and the lieutenant. A quick search through the morning mail failed to reveal the missing permit.



'Non-compliance with the provisions of the Conservation of Resources Act is a very serious offence,' said Needlenose. 'I shall have to inform my superior. In the meantime, the engine room must be sealed, and no attempt made to leave the planet.'

Hartigan's head was buzzing. 'Now just a minute. This permit is supposed to be coming to us from the Department of Fuel and Power, right?'

'If you've completed the forms correctly,' Needlenose said, with a doubtful smile.

Hartigan stabbed at a button on his desk vid. 'Get me the Department of Fuel and Power—move!'

The face of the communications P.O. appeared. 'Captain, sir, there's a call for you from the Attorney General's office.'

'I haven't got time for that now...' Hartigan did a double take as the message sunk in. 'The Attorney General's office, did you say?'

'Yes, sir. It's something about a member of our crew being under arrest.'

'So they've caught up with O'Mara at last, have they?' growled Hartigan. 'It would serve the slob right if I left him to rot in a Calprynian jail for the rest of his life.'

'Shall I tell him that, sir?'

'No, you fool! Put the call through.'

The image of the PO was replaced by that of a smooth-looking Calprynian in hexagonal glasses. 'Good morning, captain. I am Counsellor Vatim, of the Special Prosecutions Branch.'

'All right, Counsellor. What has he done, and how much is it going to cost to square it? My ship is due to blastoff in under two hours.'

'He—captain? We have six defendants in custody, all members of your crew. They are charged under Section 568 of the Transport and Highways Act; one of them with driving a ground car equipped with two tail lights instead of the regulation three, and the other five with aiding and abetting the crime.'

Hartigan quivered as another strip of skin was ripped from his already raw composure. 'We'll plead guilty. I've got to have those men here for blastoff.'

'I'm afraid that won't be possible. A plea of guilty in a case of this type carries an automatic prison sentence.'

'The devil it does!' exclaimed Hartigan.

'Although, as you probably know, all sentenced prisoners have the right to a full-dress re-trial every six weeks.'

'Six weeks! Look, Counsellor, my Clearance Certificate says I must blastoff at 13.00 hours. Can't *anything* be done?'

The Calprynian removed his glasses and polished them in a leisurely manner before answering. It was a very effective courtroom gesture, but it did nothing for Hartigan's blood pressure.

'I'll see if the case can be pushed into today's schedule. In the meantime, why don't you ask for an extension of your Clearance Certificate?'

'I can do that?'

'But of course. By going through the regular channels here on Calpryn, one can work wonders.'

'Thanks a lot, Counsellor. You've been a great help,' Hartigan said feelingly. He was sure that if he could only have another twenty-four hours to sort this mess out, his troubles would be over. Even O'Mara couldn't disappear for that long on an alien planet.

He got rid of the lieutenant and the two officials temporarily, then called the Director of the Port Authority.

'Good morning again, Captain Hartigan. I trust you have your crew assembled for the medical inspection. It is now 11.50, and our Medical Director is always punctual.'

'There's been a hitch,' said Hartigan. 'The sight-seeing party picked up a traffic ticket. The Attorney General's office are trying to rush the trial, but there may be some delay. Counsellor Vatim says that I can apply for an extension of my Clearance Certificate. Why didn't you tell me that before?'

The official shrugged. 'You didn't ask me.'

'All right, now let's play it cool and simple,' said Hartigan patiently. 'I need a twenty-four hour extension to sort out this legal tangle. Can that be arranged?'

'If you'll let me have the application in writing, I'll see that it is placed before the Tribunal for consideration.'

'Tribunal?'

'But of course,' said the Port Authority Director. 'These things must be done in the correct form. There will be an assembly of the Appeals Tribunal in three days' time. You understand that any ruling they might make will not be retrospective? An extension of your Clearance Certificate may be granted, but you will still be liable to the statutory fine of 2,000 Credits Galactic for every hour your blastoff has been delayed beyond the time stated on your original certificate.'

Hartigan made a whinnying sound. 'All right—forget it!' he roared, punching the switch that broke the connection.

The blood of two thousand years of fighting Irish ancestry was pounding in his ears as he rose to his feet. It seemed that whichever way an alien played things on Calpryn he couldn't win. All right, this time he would try more direct action. He pulled a heavy calibre blaster

out of the drawer of his desk and tucked it into the inside pocket of his jacket. It made an unsightly bulge, but Hartigan was past caring.

He chafed impatiently in the transport bay, whilst a ground car was fitted with a third tail light, then as soon as it was ready, he roared down the ramp and headed for the gates of the spaceport, narrowly missing a Calprynian car that was on its way in, carrying the Medical Director. The momentum of his anger had carried him halfway to Zoshar before he realised that he had no idea where Benson and the five crewmen were being held. That ruled out his vague plan of blasting into their jail and rescuing them, throwing him back onto a more legal line of negotiation.

It was 12.15 when the ground car screeched to a halt outside the Attorney General's building. Hartigan took the steps three at a time. In the office of Counsellor Vatim he had a brief argument over his lack of appointment with a female Calprynian secretary, then took matters into his own hands. The Special Prosecutions Counsellor looked up in surprise as the spaceman crashed unannounced through the inner door.

'All right, Counsellor—let's quit horsing around,' bawled Hartigan. 'I can't get an extension of my Clearance Certificate, and my ship is due to blast off in half an hour's time. You've got to let those men out of jail.'

Vatim glared through his hexagonal lenses. 'Do you imagine that the ancient processes of Calprynian law can be flouted to suit your convenience?'

Hartigan itched to plant a fist in the middle of that smooth, pink face, but he had sufficient sense to see that he was on the sticky end of the pole. 'Let's put it this way,' he said, in a quieter tone. 'Couldn't you get them released if I pay a sufficient sum of money to cover any possible fines into the court? Then, wouldn't it be possible to try them in their absence?'

Vatim went through his infuriating glass-polishing routine again. 'That might have been possible before, but the situation has changed since I last talked with you.'

'What do you mean?'

'You might have saved yourself considerable trouble and expense if you had been completely frank with me in the first instance,' Vatim said severely. 'As it is, you didn't see fit to tell me that there was another member of your crew at large in Zoshar—and I use the expression "at large" in the zoological sense.'

Hartigan decided to throw himself on the mercy of the prosecutor. 'All right, Counsellor, I admit it. The man was a deserter; and the six men in the ground car weren't a sight-seeing party, they were looking for him.'

Vatim snorted. 'In that case, you should have informed our police, rather than take matters into your own hands.'

'I realise that now. But under the circumstances I thought it would be best if we handled such a domestic matter ourselves.'

'A domestic matter! To allow a desperate deserter to roam at will through our unprotected city? Port



Authority Regulations lay down a minimum penalty of 5,000 Credits Galactic for such a breach. As for the matter of your six crewmen—that is now out of my hands. The Attorney General himself has taken over the case.'

'Then can I speak to him?' Hartigan asked.

'Quite impossible! The day's proceedings will already have commenced at the Litigation Amphitheatre.'

Hartigan turned abruptly and headed for the door.

'I must warn you that any attempt to interfere with the due process of law . . .' Vatim's voice faded as Hartigan rushed away down the corridor.

Slamming the ground car into gear, he drove towards the Litigation Amphitheatre. He had resigned himself to the fact that he hadn't a hope of blasting off on schedule, but at 2,000 Credits Galactic per hour he was determined to cut that delay to a minimum.

Outside the amphitheatre a long queue of Calprynians in festive mood was slowly being processed through the turnstiles of the main entrance. From inside, Hartigan could hear the unmistakable sound of a massive, expectant crowd. He surveyed the queue impatiently, and decided that there just wasn't time to take his turn. On the other hand, there would surely be some swingeing penalties for such a social crime as queue-jumping . . .

Easing the car into gear again, he began to cruise round the vast building in the hope of finding some other entrance. Eventually he pulled up outside a small door guarded by two bare-headed Calprynian policemen with stun-guns at the ready. The sign above the door read: LITIGANTS.

'Just a minute,' said one of the policemen, as Hartigan hurried towards the door. 'Where's your pass?'

'I'm the captain of the Ladybug. You're holding seven of my men in there.'

'I can't help that,' said the policeman stolidly. 'Nobody gets in without a pass.' He and his companion crowded in on Hartigan.

But the spaceman was not going to be held up at this stage for the lack of a stupid bit of paper. He waited until the cops were in close, then reached up quickly, grabbing a neck in each hand. The pink skulls came together with a satisfying 'thunk', and the Calprynians ceased to take any further interest in his progress.

Hartigan walked boldly through the door, closing it behind him. He was in a clean, well-lit corridor, with numbered doors on either side. There seemed to be no particular choice of direction to be preferred, so he began to walk to the right. From somewhere nearby he heard a mighty roar, as the crowd in the amphitheatre cheered. He winced, wondering just what could be going on in the arena.

A door opened suddenly and a Calprynian in Counsellors robes came hurrying out, colliding with Hartigan. The Calprynian was profuse in his apologies. 'I'm late, you see. I hope you will excuse . . .' He stopped, apparently recognising Hartigan's uniform. 'Oh! you must be one of the alien Counsellors.'

Hartigan took his cue. 'Yes, I seem to have got lost somehow. Perhaps you could direct me to the central arena?'

'With pleasure,' said the Calprynian. 'I'm on my way there myself.' He rubbed his hands, smiling. 'This is a great day for Calprynian litigation. I always knew that Aran Sith would come up with something sensational before the elections. First class man, Sith! Always ready to adopt new ideas and procedures.'

They walked along the corridor together. Above their heads, the crowd roared again.

'Listen to that!' glowed the Counsellor. 'After today the election will be in the bag for Sith. The reform candidate won't stand a chance.'

Hartigan tensed as they approached a door marked: COUNSELLORS AND JUDICIARY ONLY, on either side of which stood an armed policeman. But he relaxed again as, at a wave from the Counsellor, one of the guards opened the door.

'Of course, absolutely *everybody* is here today,' grumbled the Calprynian, as they found their view of the arena blocked by a crowd of standing Counsellors. Hartigan looked upwards. There must have been at least fifty thousand Calprynians of all ages sitting in the tiered seats, intent on the proceedings.

'Make way for the alien Counsellor!' called his companion, edging through the crush. 'Come along, make way there!'

Hartigan followed, aware of curious eyes turned to gaze on him. By standing on tiptoe he was at last able to look down into the arena and see what was going on.

Aran Sith, the Attorney General, was standing to one side, his arms folded proudly over the front of his robe. Michael O'Mara, engineer third-class of the Ladybug, was in the centre of the arena—and he was acting true to form.

Face-to-face with a burly Calprynian in Counsellor's robes, the red-headed Irishman was throwing punches with a will. The Calprynian was giving almost as good as he got . . . almost. As Hartigan watched, O'Mara connected with a smashing right to the body and the Calprynian staggered backwards. The crowd roared its elation.

Hartigan closed his eyes in anguish. He had no precise knowledge of the penalty for assaulting a Counsellor, but he guessed that it would be pretty hefty. O'Mara must be completely mad, or drunk . . . or both.

At that moment Hartigan heard the unmistakable hum of a stun-gun close to his ear. He just had time to realise that the police guards from the entrance must have caught up with him, before consciousness exploded in a sheet of white-hot flame.

Hartigan opened his eyes. The base of his skull was throbbing painfully from the after-effects of the stun-gun charge. He turned his head experimentally, and saw that he was lying on a couch in a luxuriously furnished office. The other occupants of the room were Aran Sith and O'Mara.



'Well, hello there, Captain! Sure it's nice to see yourself back with us again.' O'Mara's battered face split in a huge grin of welcome. By his side, the Attorney General bowed solemnly.

Trying to force his numbed brain back into action, Hartigan struggled to a sitting position. 'What's going on, O'Mara? Why aren't you in jail?'

'And me an innocent man,' said O'Mara. 'With a verdict of Not Guilty passed in me favour?'

'Innocent?' Hartigan said, incredulously.

'To be sure, your honour,' O'Mara said. 'When I was arrested they sent a Counsellor along to talk over my defence with me. Me being an alien and all, they thought I might need some help. And, seeing as I didn't know the way they carried on such shenanigans here on Calpryn, I said I'd as leave be tried under Flanagan's Law.' O'Mara winked hugely, with the side of his face away from Aran Sith. 'That put them in a bit of a muddle, because none of the learned gentlemen had the foggiest idea what Flanagan's Law was...'

Neither had Hartigan, but he sensed that this was a time for listening, rather than talking.

'... They tried to worm it out of me in all sorts of ways, but I told them that it was their job to know such things, without the help of an ignorant man like meself,' continued O'Mara. 'In the long run, after about a dozen of them had been to see me, they decided that there was nothing for it but to bring in the Attorney General himself. And he, fine upstanding gentleman that he is, wasn't too proud to admit that there might be some Law in the Galaxy that he didn't have right to the tip of his fingers. So, being a reasonable man meself, and not wanting to cause any more trouble, I told his honour.

'Saving your presence, you probably know the Law better than me, but I'll quote it for you just the same.

The sainted Flanagan said: 'Words is all right for womenfolk, but in an argument between two red-blooded men there's no finer settler than a strong right arm. When a man's flat on his back, it stands to common sense he was in the wrong, and he might as well admit it.' Well, his honour saw the right of this straight away. It seems that the people were getting tired of the old kind of trial anyway, so what should his honour do but put Flanagan's Law on the Statute Book right away, and make mine the first case to be tried under it.'

Hartigan massaged the back of his neck tenderly. It seemed that O'Mara had managed to hit on a solution to the problem that had baffled the best Alien Relations men Sol could produce. Aran Sith, desperate for some way of arousing the enthusiasm of the people and clinching his re-election must have grasped the spectacular possibilities of Trial by Combat immediately.

The Attorney General cleared his throat importantly and addressed Hartigan. 'I have a proposal that may interest you, Captain. As you are well aware, there are a number of charges outstanding on the file against yourself and your crew. It is within my power to have these quashed, if you are prepared to bide by one condition.'

'Yes?' said Hartigan, trying not to look too eager.

'I want your agreement that Michael O'Mara should be allowed to stay here on Calpryn indefinitely, as my personal assistant, in charge of training Counsellors specialising in Flanagan's Law.'

Hartigan rose to his feet, rubbing his long chin thoughtfully. 'That seems reasonable enough, if O'Mara is willing...'

'Oh, I am indeed, your honour,' beamed O'Mara.

'Very well, Counsellor,' said Hartigan. 'But there's just one small legal point that should be cleared up before I accept your proposition formally. You see, there's still a charge of Desertion outstanding in my log against O'Mara.'

Aran Sith shrugged. 'An unimportant domestic matter, but if you really wish to delay your blastoff further...'

'Ah, but this won't take a great deal of time at all,' Hartigan said. Standing to attention, he announced in his best, parade-ground voice: 'Commanding Officer's Court of Summary Jurisdiction is now in session, under the provision of Space Regulations, Section IV, para 65, and Flanagan's Amendment.'

The punch was swift, but it was powerful, carrying behind it all the pent up rage and frustration that had been building up through the day in Hartigan. O'Mara scarcely had time to see it coming before it connected fair and square on the button. He jerked a good three inches into the air, then collapsed in an unconscious heap in the corner of the room.

Hartigan massaged his bruised knuckles in a satisfied manner. 'Guilty as charged,' he announced. And now, Counsellor, if you'll be having my other men released, it's time the Ladybug was blasting off.'

# FANTASY REVIEW



## *New Writings in SF 15*

Edited by John Carnell

Published by Dennis Dobson at 18s.

*Reviewed by Kathryn Buckley*

The science fiction field has always fostered the short story and short novel both in magazine and anthology form, but collections of new short stories are a comparatively new innovation. *New Writings in SF 15* contains six stories varying in length from 4,000 to 10,000 words and makes a comfortable, enjoyable read for filling in those odd moments of leisure.

Editor John Carnell, for many years editor of *New Worlds*, brings his long years of experience to bear in the selection and presentation of these competent and professional stories. There are no wild extravaganzas of experimentation here; the reader is not expected to perform mental contortions before extracting his enjoyment. This is not to say that the stories do not contain food for thought, the common denominator for the collection being, as Mr. Carnell points out, psychology in its widest sense.

REPORT FROM LINELOS by Vincent King is, according to its blurb, concerned with paranoia and solipsism. This is a story within a story, the principal narrative being supplied by two streams of consciousness and this technique adds confusion unnecessarily to an idea that is not itself complicated.

The basic idea, as with so much of today's *sf* is almost traditional, but what gives the story its fascination is the variety of worlds and times which the mental derangement creates. The author is too lavishly inventive for this length and introduces and hints at societies, times and relationships which could easily have been expanded and made more comprehensible to the reader. In effect the end is not strong enough to support the means.

In addition, whether consciously or unconsciously, there is a large use of symbolism—Arthur, Don Quixote, the seven throws of dice, the Seemers. Unfortunately, symbolism is nowadays a two-edged sword and there is always a risk that a television image may present itself rather than the traditional image in the author's mind. The cryptic Squire, symbol of the underdog, is the most realistic character. This is one of those stories in which the journey is better than the destination; it resembles a recipe when the ingredients have been assembled but the cake has not yet been baked.

When new writers appear—which is fortunately frequent in *sf*—it is always amusing to try to 'spot the stayers'. Christopher Priest in *THE INTERROGATOR* proves himself to be in the running. This Kafka-like story could be read, without the explanation at the end, as an investigation into the effects of guilt, the desire for punishment, the individual's susceptibility to suggestion

and the nature of imprisonment. It is the most 'New Wave' of all the stories and suffers from a degree of obscurity and an ending which seems suddenly tacked on. Although the style is controlled and economic and good use is made of the senses, there are times when the author makes explicit what has already been adequately implied, which is irritating to the reader. The element of absurdity—it is surprising that there is not more enthusiasm for the Theatre of the Absurd within sf circles—brings a welcome touch of humour. The symbol of the hand, though in itself rather old, is used quite effectively.

The basic idea has fascinating possibilities which could obviously not be explored in this length and I understand a much expanded version will be published by Fabers under the title *INDOCTRINAIRE*. It should make interesting reading.

**WHEN I HAVE PASSED AWAY** by Joseph Green is about a world where a species has evolved with an afterlife as part of the normal pattern. Reminiscent of Ray Cummings, the story moves fast, though there is a noticeable lack of dialogue giving at times a *précis* feeling to the writing. Unfortunately, the idea of an afterlife has got tangled up with matriarchy and a shortening and disorienting of the lifespan. The author has failed to think through the ramifications of such a biological structure and consequently the internal logic of the story suffers.

Size and physical strength do not necessarily denote or lead to supremacy, especially when the weaker have the advantage of numbers. Such an ecology would result in a declining birthrate and at any one time there would be only a few giants since the rest of the female population would either be children or normal sized and engaged in child-bearing—having 'as many children as she can'—in six years! The intelligence factor has been totally ignored. Such a matriarchy is hard to believe in since men cannot be made too subservient because, unlike women, they cannot be raped. Nevertheless, the allusions to 'period of change' and the pains of rebirth give a very feminine feel to the whole set-up, together with the mystery surrounding the ritual rebirth and the light emitting crystals.

**SYMBIOTE** by Michael G. Coney explores a phenomenon which has hardly been dealt with by the sf field. Progress itself can provide the means to atrophy the human race and has always been viewed as a mixed blessing, but the real danger lies in human apathy; our achilles heel is our susceptibility to insidious influence. Living in a television age the notion that machines might do our thinking for us becomes uncomfortably plausible. The idea of a symbiosis as an attractive mutually beneficial alliance is cleverly conveyed by the use of the device of pets; and we all know how susceptible human beings are to pets.

Altogether an interesting evocatively written and well-rounded story, though it is a pity that the *chintos* superiority is merely an illusion achieved by means of contrast with the inept stupidity of the human beings.

It would be impossible to talk about *THE TRIAL* without feeling very saddened by the premature death of Arthur Sellings, which has thinned the ranks of British science fiction writers. By the 'In Memoriam' box at the front it is obvious that the collection had gone to the printers at the time of his death so that this story is probably amongst the last he wrote.

Characteristically, it is deftly and skilfully handled. Communication, or the lack of it is investigated in a very well-told story that question's man's arrogant missionary obsession, however well-intentioned, and once again we have aliens portrayed sympathetically.

The last story in the collection deals ostensibly with the problem of noise but as with most of the other stories other themes come crowding in. In *THERAPY 20000* they are inter-related, for it is also about overcrowding. One of the factors that makes overcrowding so intolerable is, of course, the increase in noise level and the way other people's noise seems to rob the individual of his own existence. This sense of loss of identity is well conveyed, as also is the disorientation of the individual and the shifting of the pattern of the norm. Those who cannot conform to society as it is must be regarded as sick—an insidious deprivation of personal freedom. If the real world proves too impossible, there is always illusion and the dream character that Keith Roberts creates is almost as real as his hero, so that the ending which might appear ambiguous is logically convincing.

The spectre of noise has of course been recognised by present-day society and steps are already being taken to combat it. Noise absorbing materials are already in existence and more progress in this direction is likely, so that his concept of the future technology is not totally convincing. It is therefore not such a forward looking theme—rather akin to a writer of Dickens' day propagandising about the evils of child labour.

The language and imagery used are, however, lively, as is the religious motif, and this all adds up to a satisfying tale.

The new vogue for publication of original short stories in book form gives a good deal of scope to authors which would not be available in magazines. In particular, there is further market for the novelette, which is an awkward length, and one which sf authors tend to use as a sort of sounding board. At their best they tend to have too many ideas, none of which is fully exploited, so that they are really condensed novels—evidenced by the appearance of so many later as full length books. To put this another way, too many sf stories suffer from a lack of creative discipline, perhaps because their authors have such fertile imaginations.

The ambience of a really good science fiction story lies in the cohesion of its creativity. It is not enough for a writer to say 'what would happen if?', he must go on questioning the effects of his hypothetical society so that details on the periphery of his story add to the credibility factor. Not to do this is like describing a society which uses electricity but burns candles for

lighting (unless of course the author is deliberately drawing attention to human inconsistencies).

Without wanting to quibble, grammatical errors should be dealt with at some time between typewriter and printed page, especially when one is so obvious as to cause aggravation in the average reader.

This is an enjoyable collection, which, whilst it does not contain anything strikingly memorable, does not contain any duds and would make equally good reading for newcomers to the genre as to addicts.

*The Black Flame* by Stanley G. Weinbaum.

Avon Books V 2280, 224 pages. 75c.

Reviewed by John Foyster

Sometimes a funny thing happens on the way to the reader. What you and I read in a book is most often just what the author wrote. Sometimes it isn't. This may be because the editor made changes or it may be because a printer's error or two showed up. Quite often an author, reading his galleys, can pick up these latter faults, but this isn't always the case. Some mistakes in printing don't matter: if John Smith is referred to once as John Slish no one is going to find it difficult to follow the plot. But others are more annoying: these occur when one perfectly good word is substituted for another perfectly good word, so that the sentence takes on all kinds of shades of meaning which the author didn't intend.

Now according to Sam Moskowitz, Stanley G. Weinbaum died in late 1935, so we can safely say that he didn't see this edition of **THE BLACK FLAME** through the printer's hands. To tell the truth, he wasn't able to perform that office for the first edition (*Startling Stories*, January 1939) either. So we can't know whether Weinbaum actually had his protagonist imagine himself to be described as a 'calloused murderer', which is what happens on page 81 of this edition (though this is the first page of **THE BLACK FLAME** proper). It is important, since whether or not this fellow has horny hands from killing hundreds of people will determine our attitude towards him, and in the novel this man, Tom Connor, is a more central and important figure than most scientific heroes are. Weinbaum is concerned to explore Connor's reactions to the strange new world into which he finds himself thrust by an apparently unjust execution. How we react to that world, and how we react to Weinbaum's novel, depends very much on how we feel about Tom Connor, and this description, or misprint, coming as early as it does, is jarring. Perhaps it is a small matter, but in a novel like this it matters a lot. Almost certainly Weinbaum wrote 'callous murderer'. Did Mort Weisinger make the mistake? Perhaps—but Avon should not have let it through.

So much for the dangers of reprinting old novels. **THE BLACK FLAME**, together with the short novel, **THE DAWN OF FLAME** (*Thrilling Wonder Stories*, June 1939) forms one of the most interesting studies of a future civilization written in science fiction, though, as has been indicated above, most of the information



comes not from direct description but from the reactions of a man of our time. At times Weinbaum is explicit in revealing the future and the sort of humans who people it, but on many occasions he prefers to work indirectly. One problem he did not seem to overcome was that of having his characters act as largely as they are portrayed: sometimes the actions of Margaret of Urbs or Joaquin Smith are inconsistent with those of the sort of person we might expect to find in the positions they hold, but generally speaking this does not matter too much.

**THE DAWN OF FLAME** is concerned with giving the reader a clear picture of the world of which Weinbaum writes by describing the changes which the rulers of **THE BLACK FLAME** made upon a world not unlike our own. **THE BLACK FLAME** describes that changed world, and makes the point that Man (in the form of Tom Connor) can survive in any kind of civilization, and can usually come to appreciate its finer points.

Weinbaum's prose is lively, and this will be one of the reprints of the year.

*Outlaws of The Moon* by Edmond Hamilton.

Popular Library 60-2399, 128 pages, 60c.

When this short novel was first published in the Spring 1942 issue of *Captain Future* it formed the tenth part of what must be the longest series of stories about one character\* written in science fiction: twenty novels and four short stories. When it was written Edmond Hamilton was writing all of the series (though fairly soon it was to become a job for several different writers) so it is hardly surprising that the novel shows signs of occasional haste. The only really obvious one is a place where Hamilton felt that perhaps there was a gap in the plot, and he reflects on this momentarily and writes in a little speech rationalising it. It works well, but probably wasn't necessary. **OUTLAWS OF THE MOON** hurtles



through its plot so rapidly that the reader scarcely has time to draw breath, much less any conclusions about the credibility of it all, or about the scientific verisimilitude (which Hamilton sometimes *imposes* upon the reader, rather than just letting it emerge).

The result of this speed of writing and speed of action is a novel which is extremely enjoyable—if read at about the same speed at which it was conceived. As a time-passer this kind of novel is second to none—but don't expect *too* much.

(\*Perry Rhodan and the Golden Amazon excepted).

*Kavin's World* by David Mason.

Lancer Books 74-564, 224 pages, 75c.

This novel is not a reprint, and, although the publishers attempt to tie it in with Conan and *THE LORD OF THE RINGS*, it is a novel which attempts some pretty fancy footwork, within a framework which might be regarded as a considerable handicap—that of the sword and sorcery novel.

Mr. Mason has decided to write this novel in the first person which places considerable restrictions upon his style. There can be, for example, no heaving bronzed muscles on the hero and this must be admitted to be a great disadvantage for any man setting out to do battle with wizards, dragons and others. But the real problems seem to arise in the passages which would deal with action situations. Whereas in a third-person novel the author can describe in loving terms the strength and horridness of the monster with whom the hero is doing battle, the first-person narrative is reduced to a fairly simple and flat description of the battle: the narrator is

too busy fighting the giant worm, monstrous bird, powerful wizard or giant warrior to be greatly concerned with the exact nature of the horror with which he is battling, and certainly too busy to take time off to tell the reader about it all. And when it comes to sex—well, the modest narrator can scarcely get past a simple 'I kissed her', whereas Robert E. Howard, for example, would go into more detail.

With that sort of handicap one might have expected *KAVIN'S WORLD* to come out as a rather flat piece of writing: in fact the contrary is nearer an accurate description of the situation. Perhaps this is achieved partly by the accuracy of the title: the novel *is* really about Kavin's *World* and not really about Kavin himself. But the author also deserves credit: he has done extremely well, though only by including everything up to and including the kitchen sink.

The result is a novel which screams with colour, the background tending to make the reader ignore the characters because of its strangeness—and then a few minutes later the reverse being the case, while weird characters occupy fairly straightforward scenes (on a boat, for example). The only real problem is that of getting a clear picture of the hero: it isn't really clear from the introduction, which almost certainly is intended to help the reader identify with Kavin, but it does emerge slowly over the course of the book. Even then it is by no means complete, and possibly this is intended as the first of a series.

What sort of a place is Kavin's world? Basically it is an alternate-universe world, though not much is made of this. Magic, which seems semi-scientific, is widespread. Civilisations rise and fall pretty quickly, and communications between different parts of the world seem poor or non-existent. There's an all-knowing wizard who seems to be out of place in Kavin's world, just as much as the three permanent villains (there are, of course, many subsidiary villains, all of whom are subdued by Kavin with ridiculous ease) are out of place. Apart from this Mr. Mason seems to have gone all out to introduce just about every possible oddity he could discover: for besides the semi-scientific magic, for example, which we feel is just an unknown science, in at least one place the gods have a great deal to say about Kavin's future. Examples could be multiplied, but not in so effective a manner as Mr. Mason has done.

Perhaps the novel owes much of its charm to the very mistiness of the world, perhaps it is due to the carefully archaic language Mr. Mason employs, or perhaps it is just that Mr. Mason is a fine story-teller. At any rate it is a surprising book: both because of its plot and because of the quality of its writing. And the surprise is a pleasant one.

Lancer have also reprinted Hal Clement's *NEEDLE* (with a fine cover by Kelly Freas). This novel, now twenty years old, needs no apologies from anyone, and at 75c. is a good buy. The Avon reprint of some years ago was titled *FROM OUTER SPACE*.

John Foyster

Terraforming . . .

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

adapting the

planets to men.

But there had been

an earlier technique . . .

# One of the family

As Phoebe-Five grew steadily in the foreport of the space-flitter, Richard Daniels stopped kidding himself this was anything more than a break from routine and relaxed. He could afford to admit now, with their destination so close, that he'd never really intended to survey Five for terraforming. That had just been an excuse. He smiled wryly, acknowledging how obvious it must have been to everyone back on Four, his bringing Jane and Kenny along . . .

But they'd gone along with the farce, poker-faced, back-slapping. 'Yeah, take a preliminary look-see, Dick. Maybe you can figure something.' Knowing he needed the break, winking behind his back.

And, by God, he did need it. Months he'd slaved as boss of the terraforming crew on Four, months of responsibility, nerve-racking tension building inside him to make him unbearable at home. Home? What did he know of home on a job? Well, from here on he'd let his hair down, play the family man—the hell with work. Four was under control, colonists trickling in, and he wasn't needed any more. All the big ones had been cracked. What was left was routine. And soon he'd be off to another star, another planet with his crew to start all over again changing an alien environment to suit the colonists from Earth.

No-one on his team seriously believed they were going to tackle two planets in one system, something that had never before been attempted. Terraforming, to get the climate right, meant shifting orbits, and that was very tricky stuff. Shifting one planet affected every other body in that system.

There were other items of course, like atomising mass to reduce gravity, bleeding off toxins and setting up an oxygen cycle, restructuring the soil and creating watersheds. The local ecology too had to be watched. But the

big bugbear was orbital-shift—and that was why this trip was just an excuse to get away from it all.

Only it was hard to take his mind completely off work. Terraforming was in his blood, his life-work; it was vitally important and he didn't want to do anything else.

Five, now. As the flitter approached his mind automatically culled statistics: a naturally smaller mass and so lighter gravity; a lower temperature range altogether; an atmosphere so thin it would take a massive oxygen-injection to make it breathable. His brain insisted on considering routines, testing one against another, discarding . . .

Until Jane and Kenny came through to the cabin.

'Just thinking of you,' he lied cheerfully, and a familiar warmth set his blood tingling. Jane, a buxom brunette, still looked good to him, better than many a younger woman. Kenny, recently eight, could be a packet of trouble, over-curious, rebellious.

Half-sternly, he said: 'Remember all I've told you. This world hasn't been tamed, so don't go outside till I say. And you wear furs and oxygen-sacs the whole time, and don't wander far from the ship—there may be hostile life.'

Jane, smiling, murmured: 'You've told us before, Dick —we got the message.'

Kenny pressed his young face against the foreport, staring, excited. 'A whole planet, just for us—bet we're the first to land, ever!'

'As far as I know, we are.'

'Bet I kill the first monster,' Kenny shouted, fingers pointing a gun. 'Bang! Bang-bang!'

Jane hung on his arm. Kenny gazed fascinated at the planet swelling visibly as they swooped down, silent now, dreaming some small-boy fantasy of his own.

Daniels felt a great contentment, pride. There wasn't much he wouldn't do to protect his family—correction: there was nothing he wouldn't do.

He studied the surface below as the flitter descended, a big-boned man with hard planes to his face and grey eyes. The flitter went straight in to land. On the recon trip, he recalled, the spotters had orbited, testing with probe instruments only—and had decided Four was a better bet. So, a virgin world . . .

Daniels picked his landing spot with some care. A lot of Five was arid, with hills more like dunes, and he wanted running water; he settled for a plain where a stream watered clumps of brushwood. Not too close to the brush; no telling yet what might lurk there.

But at the last moment, the retro-jets fired out of phase and the flitter wobbled off course. He set down in a hurry, only a few hundred yards from the brush; and now the clumps appeared denser, almost a wall of grey trunks and fern-like foliage.

He checked the jets first, in case he needed emergency take-off. Fortunately, the fault proved a minor one, and quickly corrected. Satisfied, he turned to the monitoring instruments; atmosphere and temperature outside coincided with the spotters' record sheet.

'They did a good job, Jane—text-book stuff.'

And the record said 'no life on Five.' But that was something he kept to himself; anything that moved was hostile where his family was concerned.

From the port, the plain swept away to an empty horizon on one side; on the other rose the brushwood forest. Distant, barely visible was a range of hills, Phoebe was setting, bathing the land with blood-orange light; she appeared smaller than she did from Four, more like Earth's own sun he thought.

'Time enough to explore tomorrow, by daylight.'

Jane heated a prepack meal and they ate leisurely, thinking of the morning and what it might bring. Kenny, over-excited, didn't want to bunk down and Daniels had to be firm with him. He dowsed the lights and clasped Jane to him as he dropped into dreamless sleep . . .

Daniels woke early. Five had a short night period and he rose without waking his wife to watch the dawn rise. He circled the flitter, looking from each port in turn, watching the land. In particular he studied the forest and the stream. Nothing moved anywhere. No animals came to drink. It seemed they really had this planet to themselves.

From the galley came a smell of cooking and Kenny's boyish voice: 'I'm hungry! When are we going outside?'

Daniels joined them for breakfast and, afterwards, fitted an oxygen-sac and dressed in furs. As he picked up a laser-torch and clipped it to his belt, he said: 'Dog the port after me. Don't open it in any circumstances until I give you clearance.' He went outside, descended the ladderway.

He paused at the bottom to give himself time to adjust; the sac fed oxygen direct into his bloodstream and was safe enough for up to twelve hours. Light gravity made his movements easy. He watched to make

sure the lock closed solidly behind him. Underfoot, the ground was rock-hard and rimed with frost. Despite his furs, the cold got to him and he stamped his boots and beat his arms against his body as he walked round the flitter.

He studied the ground intently for sign that anything might have come to investigate during the night hours. He found nothing, and moved warily towards the trees. The open plain represented no danger; they could see for miles. But the forest had to be scouted. He patrolled along the edge of the grey-green wall of trunks, peering into the shadows, looking for trails. The fern-like foliage proved brittle and snapped off at a touch.

He heard another sound, almost an echo. Something was moving among the brushwood. He froze, grabbed for his torch and levelled it.

Something came out of the trees towards him. The shock of meeting was double-edged. He hadn't really expected any kind of life here; and in the dim twilight filtering between the twisted trunks, he mistook it first for a man. (Crashlanded, he thought, a survivor.)

But quickly realising his mistake, he switched the torch to full power—turning the laser to a fearsome weapon—as he covered the alien.

It closed slowly with him, a biped ten feet tall. The limbs were spindly but the chest development enormous—big lungs for a thin atmosphere. It was naked, covered in light down, with large flapping ears—and looked ancient, the stick limbs weak.

Daniels relaxed a fraction, enough to speak urgently into his radio mike: 'Jane, Kenny, alien life out here. Keep a sharp watch.'

The odd figure shuffled towards him. The face, a grotesque parody of a human face with round eyes and floppy lips; sounds mumbled from the almost toothless mouth. Speech. So it had some degree of intelligence then, and Daniels knew he'd made an important find. Men had not encountered many intelligent life forms on their expansion through the galaxy, and none humanoid.

He lowered his torch reluctantly, fought down the fear tingling his spine. Hell, he could out-fight, out-run this thing any time. He held out empty hands in a gesture of friendliness, spoke softly.

The ears flapped, the round eyes peered at him. Again came the mumble of sound, a meaningless sing-song, strangely accented.

Daniels turned his back, beckoning, and started for the flitter. Glancing over his shoulder he saw the alien following. It seemed a long way even though he knew Jane would be watching, ready to shout a radio warning at any suspicious move behind him.

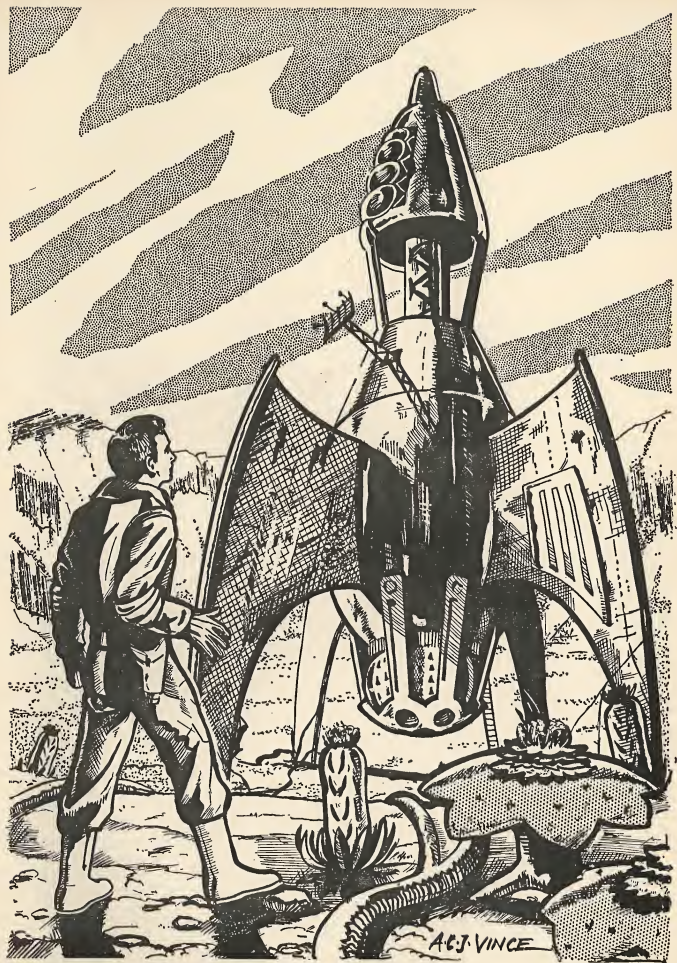
Then he reached the flitter, a silver ovoid on stilts, the ladder hanging down. *Home*. His pulse slackened to somewhere near normal as he climbed to the lock.

'Pass me the voice-box, Jane.'

The lock opened briefly and he took the instrument. 'You'll be careful, Dick?'

He nodded, and the lock closed. He descended, set the black box on the frozen ground as the alien shuffled





up. He spoke into the hand mike, demonstrating, offered it to the alien. It mumbled away in its own tongue, on and on . . .

Put sounds in, Daniels thought; the analyser searched for patterns; and out came an approximate translation. But only approximate. It took time and patience to get real results.

The cold got into his bones and made the job cheerless, but he made headway almost from the start and stuck it out. The alien picked up Galactic surprisingly fast, if crudely.

Daniels reached the point where they could exchange a few simple words and then offered food. Some the alien rejected, some it tried and spat out, some it relished.

'More . . . more of the choclat.'

The hours passed; by nightfall, when Daniels climbed the ladder and dogged the port after him, he felt satisfied. After a hot meal he watched the light fade outside, saw the alien squatting patiently on the ground below the ladderway, waiting. It looked a lonely, forlorn figure.

Beside him, Jane murmured, 'It doesn't seem right somehow, leaving him out there.'

'It's alien,' Daniels said harshly.

'Alan?' Kenny mimicked. 'Is his name Alan?'

The name stuck. In the days following, as Daniels persevered with his language lessons, he too began to think of it as 'Alan'. The thing was so obviously not hostile; just old and struggling to mouth human speech, pathetically glad to be near the Earthman, the source of 'choclat'.

'You Daniels. You call me Alan. Daniels give Alan more choclat, yes?'

'Yes,' he replied, and wondered how long it was going to take to learn the full story. Too long. It was a job for a team; he'd have to radio Four and get help.

The thing was harmless, so when Jane insisted on going outside and Kenny clamoured to meet Alan, Daniels felt he had to give in.

From the first, Jane was sympathetic towards Alan, treating him as a pet to be fed and made a fuss of. And Kenny tired himself out romping with Alan . . . chasing a ball, Daniels noted, the alien could move faster than his son, faster than he'd have guessed. He noted that with mental unease.

'This is fun,' Kenny chortled at the end of the day. 'Alan's a real friend.'

Kenny tried the voice-box too, but Daniels couldn't make much sense of their dialogue; a combination of small-boy fantasy and alien mythology defeated him. Kenny didn't want to sleep aboard the flitter, didn't want to leave his new friend.

Next day, they made camp outside and Jane cooked over a fire beside the stream. 'He's almost human, I'd swear,' she commented.

'But it isn't,' Daniels snapped back, 'and don't ever forget that. God knows what alien motivation goes on inside its head—so be careful.'

Alan, when not playing with Kenny or talking into the voice-box, took to following Jane around the camp, trying to help with the chores. Its expression was at once wistful and eager, like a lost dog that has found a new master.

But the alien was clumsy; it stumbled and upset the canteen slung over the fire and their meal was ruined. It tried to clear up the mess and only got in Daniels' way.

His temper sharpened by hunger, he snapped in exasperation: 'Clear off! You're always underfoot—now get out and leave us alone!'

Alan looked stunned, but the tone of voice was unmistakable. It shuffled off a few paces, looked back with a hurt expression and then made slowly for the trees.

Jane, incredulous, said: 'Why, he's crying. You've hurt his feelings. He was getting to be one of the family, and now . . . I'm ashamed of you, Dick.'

She rose and called: 'Alan! Alan, come back—it's all right,' but the alien disappeared among the trees.

A sullen atmosphere pervaded their meal, not entirely due to its lateness.

The following day, Daniels was writing a report on the alien when it emerged from the trees, hovered between the camp and the forest as if unsure of a welcome. Kenny spotted it first and ran, whooping towards it.

'Alan! Come and play with me, Alan!'

The alien moved then, very fast on its stick limbs, faster than Daniels would have thought possible. It swooped down on Kenny, snatched him up, spun round and ran back towards the trees.

Daniels, scared, came to his feet grabbing for the laser torch—only to realise he dare not fire for risk of hitting his son. He dropped the torch and sprinted after them, shouting: 'Put him down. Leave him alone!'

The alien seemed to hesitate, fractionally, slowed its pace and then, finally, obeyed the command. Carefully, it set Kenny down on the ground and turned to wait for Daniels, face expressionless.

Kenny complained as his father came panting up. 'You've spoilt our fun, Dad—it was only a game.'

Daniels said harshly, 'Go back to your mother,' and stared into the alien's lidless eyes. 'Try anything like that again and I'll kill you.' His heart beat like a drum; he couldn't remember ever being so scared. If anything happened to one of his family . . .

Alan stared back at him, saying nothing.

Daniels gave him one last hard look and wheeled back to the flitter. He was shaking.

'I knew we couldn't trust it,' he muttered. 'There's no telling what goes on in that thing's mind.'

Jane said, doubtfully, 'Perhaps it was only a game.'

'Bet Alan was kidnapping me,' Kenny bragged. 'Taking me back to the tribe.'

Daniels started. Tribe? Suppose there were others hiding out somewhere, waiting . . . waiting for what? He should have thought of that before. He picked up the laser.

'Stay close to the ship,' he said. 'Get inside fast if any more of them show up.'

He set off towards high ground at a fast pace, climbing steadily. Alan had vanished among the trees; was it watching him? Daniels' face set grimly. The plain was empty, but what lay behind the hills? He reached the crest, out of breath and looked around.

Barre dunes, some scrubland. No sign of life. He studied the forest from his new vantage point; nothing stirred. He turned again, gaze sweeping the horizon.

What was that? Something, distant, glinted in the sun, glistening like polished metal. It was too far off to be certain, but it might be an artifact. He made a quick decision; whatever it was must be investigated, and the quickest way was to take the flitter up. The safest way too.

His curiosity was roused and he moved back down the slope, thinking ahead, not looking round him. The forest lay to his right and dunes cut off his vision. Halfway to the stream and his camp he raised his head, and paused a moment in shocked disbelief. His heart seemed to stop beating. Alan had returned in his absence. Fear turned him cold.

The alien had its long thin arms wrapped around Jane and the obscene mask of its face slobbered over her. She was tight against its huge chest.

Fear turned to blazing fury in Daniels as he raced forward. He opened his mouth to scream but the words choked in his throat. He reached them, gripped the alien's shoulder, and his anger lent him abnormal strength. He tore them apart.

Alan staggered and almost fell; it had not been expecting a violent attack from behind.

While the alien remained off balance, vulnerable, Daniels' laser leapt into his hand without any conscious effort on his part. Through the curtain of red rage enfolding him he registered Jane's appalled shriek: 'No!' But his thumb was already jammed hard on the firing stud and the white-hot beam burned through the big-lunged chest.

A hurt, bewildered expression momentarily crossed the alien mask as it toppled to the ground, dying before his eyes. Alan spoke no last words as he sprawled in a growing pool of blood.

Blood? Daniels thought wildly, but it couldn't be, not from an alien...

Jane sobbed in shock: 'You didn't have to kill him—I could have handled him.'

And Kenny beat at him with small clenched hands. 'He was my friend—Alan won't play with me any more now.'

Daniels swore, raging. 'It, damn you—not him, it!' He forced himself to calmness. 'We're getting out of here—there may be others.'

Silently, they climbed into the flitter and Daniels jettied up. Even now he knew he couldn't leave without finding out what that metallic glint had been in the sun behind the hills. He headed towards it...

He saw it then, and refused to believe his eyes until Kenny shouted, 'Look at that funny old ship!' It was big—a starship—old and rusting away. It had a deserted look about it, squatting there in the empty landscape.

He set the flitter down a short way off. 'Stay aboard—keep the lock closed,' he ordered, and walked across to the old hulk. How old? he wondered, and felt strangely uneasy. He sensed something wrong about the derelict, something he couldn't immediately put his finger on.

But he knew what it was once he stepped through the gaping port. Shocked, he stood staring at a notice written in one of the pre-Galactic tongues, English. This ship was from Earth.

In the control cabin he found the log-book, thin metal leaves encribed with antique writing. It took him some while to translate:

'The way the adapted ones fit this terrain is more than satisfactory. For a first attempt this biological experiment can be called a striking success. More than that, one totally unexpected side effect—'

Daniels' memory clicked. He remembered some ancient history, a conflict between opposing scientific ideas. To adapt man to alien worlds, or to adapt the planets to men. Terraforming had won in the end... but before the conflict had been resolved, this ship had come to Five with colonists biologically adapted to meet local conditions.

He read further: '—unexpected side effect has been the longevity of the adaptations. Research so far indicates that this may be due to the biological experiment rather than to any effect of the new environment...'

There was a register of names, all crossed through except the last. That final survivor, Daniels thought, how he must have longed for mankind to come again, and shuddered.

He left the hulk and walked over the empty land towards the flitter, composing phrases, imagining how he would tell Jane and Kenny he had killed the last of the original colonists, one of the human family.

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# FULL-FIVE

By E. C. TUBB

An outstanding novelette  
of the terrors of our future  
society

*Coming in the next issue!*



I've seen the Karkon Belly-Walkers, the Lag-Lag Caesarsaurus and the three-legged people on Triplestrut. I'm around 170 years old, and as a snôt-nosed kid I flew the old gas-type aircraft from one corner of Old Earth to the other. I saw all there was to see on Old Earth, and it wasn't enough for me and, like a lot of others, when the chance came, I headed for Out There.

I've been around. I've seen the twin sunset on Dualsol, had my blood boiled on Zizzullzizzul, and been through the Pearly Gates of Paradiso. On Arctical I've had my thermostat tuned up enough to cook plastic crap, and still nearly frozen to death. And while out prospecting on Mistifi, we were surrounded by Blobbers, and only two of us escaped with our lives.

There's hardly a place within reach I've not been to, and hardly a thing worth seeing I've not seen. I've brushed with Death so often that there's hardly any bristles left. If they took the refibre and consub out of me, they'd be lucky to be left with a hank of hair and a piece of bone. How are you, son?

'Uhuh.' The response was resigned rather than cordial. 'Which granddaddy are you?'

'Me, boy?' The old-timer looked a young sixty. 'I'm about the oldest granddaddy you got. You're Miriam's kid, ain't you? That makes me your six-G GFM Frank. How about that, eh? There's not many has been around as long as I have, son. There's things I could tell you...'

'Did you say six-G GFM Frank?'

'Uh? Yes, son. That's me. One of the first ever to spang out into the Universe. I was the first ever to set foot on Farrangon, and it was one of my expeditions that first made contact with the Craniumites. Now that was an experience, boy. We arrived there sometime in the 4th degree slide, and, son, were we surprised when these ships came out to meet us! I'm telling you, boy, we...'

'If you're six-G GFM Frank, then you're the one that six-G UF Morton rescued from the collapsing surface of Crumbell, is that right?'

'Uh? Morton? Morton?' Six-G GFM Frank was momentarily puzzled. Then his face cleared. 'Morton! That old son of a four-eyed dribble-slopper. Hah! What? He rescued me? Who told you that? Did he tell



# AND FATHER'S KNEE

## JACK WODHAMS

*Note :*

Two-G AF=Great-Great-Aunt, Father's side.

Three-G UM=Great-Great-Great Uncle, Mother's side.

you that? Hah! Why, the lying, low-down, undersurface grimfiltrator, he didn't rescue *me!* It was *me* that rescued *him!*

'Oh?' The boy looked sorry that he had brought the subject up.

'Listen to me, boy, and I'll tell you how it all happened. Yes, sir, I carried him for three days on my back. Now this Morton, what is he, your six-G UF? Yeah, well we all have blood-kin that we're not proud of.

'Your six-G UF Morton was a bum, a no-good bum. It was through him that we landed on Crumbell at all. He had some idea that he was a mineralogist, see? And against all our advice, he insisted that we go on down. Are you listening, son?'

'Mmm? Yes, sir.'

The boy kept his eyes open, and put on a mask of polite attentiveness. The old man's lap was not the most comfortable of seats, but the boy by now was practised to tolerate such bony conformations. Only part of his mind received the words of his six-G GFM Frank; behind the facade of paying heed, he dreamt his private dream—himself grown up and alone, a hermit, alone on

a world without people.

'That there Morton was a vacuum-skull if ever there was one. I was young then, and didn't know the secs and calc as well as I do now, but even so, I knew better than to set down on that there world. But Morton, stubborn fool, he would have it, and so . . .'

The boy sat patiently, only part hearing as the old man went on. And on. And on.

'I thought you weren't going to come,' Hue said. 'I was just about to go home.'

'Ah.' Furn dropped into the hole beside him. 'Had another great-grandfather called in. Gab, gab, gab, nothing but gab. A six-G one, so you can guess what it was like.'

'Oh, Lorka! There seems to be more of them than any other kind,' Hue bemoaned. 'I've had a five-G.G., two four-G.U.'s, three I-don't-know-what cousins, and half-a-dozen or so allsorts in the last two weeks. What did he give you?'

'Huh!' Furn kicked the other side of their bunker in disgust. 'Another magic scrockle-box. All the way from

Wichtland, as usual. With all the things in space . . .  
'They're cheap, that's why,' Hue opined. 'With all the kid relatives they got, they can't afford anything decent.'  
'Yeah, maybe, but I've got enough scrokkle-boxes to stock a traypost,' Furn growled. 'I'd give them all just so long as I didn't have to listen to them gab, gab, gab all the time. Dad won't listen. Mom won't listen. No. It's got to be me.'

'Yeah, same here. It's not fair.'

'Adventures. That's all they can talk about is their adventures. On and on. How they saved a life here, how they nearly got crushed to death there, and how they were nearly boiled alive somewhere else. Aaaaah!' Furn grimaced. 'It makes you sick!'

Hue nodded glumly. 'They seem to know every damn thing. Only have to open your mouth and away they go. "Did I ever tell you about the time when we were on Scraggy?" or "That reminds me of the time when we lost half the crew to the Blutungas".'

'Yeah,' Furn replied. 'On and on. Gab, gab, gab. You can't even roll a gymbaltine without they know how to do it better, and a hundred new ways, and how he used one umpteen years ago to escape from the Lictors, or Spoctons, or Speernozes, or whatever. Yah!'

They lapsed into silence and brooded for a while.

'Relatives are an awful nuisance,' Hue said.

'Yeah. The world seems full of 'em. The Universe is full of 'em. And new ones are calling every day,' Furn said. 'You know, Dad says I've got 117 great-grandfathers altogether. All still living. 117! And that's just great-grandfathers!'

'You're lucky,' Hue commented. 'I've got 132.' He said under despondency. 'We shouldn't have to put up with it.'

'H'm. Dad says I have to listen. He says it's relief-work, or something. But it's no relief to us.' Furn sounded bitter. 'And these old ones are the worst. The very worst. They go back and back. This six-G of mine even went back to when *he* was a kid and fell off some crazy icicle thing that had two wheels on it.'

'Oh, crug,' Hue clucked sympathetically. 'It's bad when they go back that far.'

'You're tuning it fine.' Furn shook his head. 'They've done everything. Zik! I wish I could live in the old days. The *real* old days.'

'Huh?' Hue was surprised. 'You don't mean that?'

'Yes, I do. The real old days when relatives used to die almost before they had time to become relatives. In those days there weren't many grandfathers, let alone great-grandfathers.'

'Ah.' Slowly Hue nodded. 'Yeah. They must have been good times then.'

The pair began idly to dream of those glorious far-off times when relatives were as scarce as a dumb oldster.

Their reverie was rudely broken by the sound of Furn's buzzer and the voice of Mom. 'Furn, darling, come on home now. Tea is ready, and I've had some fudgirilla made.'

Furn raised his eyebrows. Fudgirilla! Hadn't had that

for a while. 'Be right there, Mom.'

Furn scrambled from the hole. 'Likewise sometime, Hue.'

Hue waved. 'Likewise.'

'Look who's called, Furn! It's your three-G Aunt Florence, all the way from Torrigid!'

Furn's heart sank. He might have known that there would be a catch in it. Lately his rebellion had been showing.

'Well, aren't you going to say 'hello' to your Aunt Florence?' Aunt Florence said, dropping the three-G. An adequately padded woman, seeming in her forties, she held out her arms. 'Come over here and let me look at you. My, what a fine looking boy you are! Here, I've brought a present for you.' And with a radiant smile, she handed him a parcel.

Furn could tell by the outline that it was yet another magic scrokkle-box. He took the parcel and bowed his head, completely at a loss for words.

'Ah, there, he's all choked up, poor darling,' three-G Aunt Florence gushed. 'Here, come sit with me and tell me all about yourself.' She sat and swept him onto her lap in one smooth experienced motion. 'There. Did you enjoy your tea? I would have hurried if I'd known what you were having. Do you know the first time I tasted fudgirilla? It was when I was in the chorus of Kemplar's Gossamer Starways. We were on tour, I remember, and this time we touched down on Ambago, and . . .'

'Four-G AM Lilly was in the chorus, too,' Furn said listlessly. 'So was two-G AF Marina, and two-G AM Juanita, and . . .'

'Were they, dear? How interesting,' three-G AM Florence cut in. 'That's not surprising. There's no business like it.'

'Two-G AF Penelope was a top-line revealer, once, and three-G AF Beatrice was an opera singer, and four-G AM . . .'

'Yes, yes, yes, dear. But show business isn't everything, you know. For instance, did you know that your Aunt Florence was once married to the Great Sir Olafant Genecker himself? Aha!'

She saw Furn's mouth start to open, and quickly forestalled him. 'And I've been on exploring expeditions, too! A lone woman on some of the wildest planets in the Universe! It was with Gerald, my seventh husband . . . or was it my sixth? Oh, anyway, it doesn't matter. But, my! What a dashing fellow he was. There was just the two of us, and we were in this tiny, tiny space-ship, and we landed on this splendid planet named Wotjudsep. At least, we thought it was splendid at first, but we had not been there very long when we began to hear this very strange roaring sound. I remember. . . .'

Furn stifled a yawn and settled his features to give four-G AM Florence the impression that his ear-drums were avid for her every word. He would be a hermit, he decided. With Hue. Just the two of them. Hermits. Ah.

He let his ancient aunt ramble on. At least she was more comfortable to sit on than six-G GFM Frank.

# The Impatient Dreamers

WALTER GILLINGS

*CONTINUING his reminiscences of the early days of British science fiction, one of its leading pioneers tells how the first national organisation of sf fans developed from America's Science Fiction League, and of the specialist magazines which catered for their interests*

## 5. Hands across the sea

The bond between the American science fiction magazines and their British readers was always something unique. Among the gaudy variety of publications which filtered into this country in the 1930s, none commanded a more enthusiastic yet critical following than *Amazing*, *Wonder* and *Astounding Stories*. Whether they reaped much benefit from our patronage is doubtful. The general belief that the remainder copies on which most of us relied came over as ships' ballast was vigorously denied by those who distributed them. But new copies were not easy to lay hands on, and few fans were wealthy enough to subscribe; nor was there any need when you could capture all three magazines for a bob if you hunted around long enough.

The elusiveness of some issues soon led to a few enterprising fans and dealers setting up as specialist suppliers, at prices more attuned to the demand. In due course this was met by the import of current issues in greater numbers—offered at even more formidable cost to the impatient, impoverished reader. One and sixpence was a lot to pay for a magazine in those days . . .

But not many could resist the new Street & Smith *Astounding* which, in 1934, represented no fewer than 160 pages of revived sf by such top-notch writers as E. E. Smith, Murray Leinster, Nathan Schachner (however you cared to pronounce the name), Jack Williamson, and our own John Russell Fearn—that 'favourite, all-too-seldom-seen author' who swept to the fore on the wave of the 'thought-variant'. Yes; there were 'new waves' even then—at 25 cents a ripple!

That year, Gernsback's *Wonder* continued to feature stories by English writers John Beynon Harris, Festus Pragnell, Benson Herbert and John Edwards (real name John Edward Muckle). It also introduced P. E. Cleator, pioneer of the British Interplanetary Society, who found himself accused by a misguided reader of having

plagiarised some obscure American story of which he had never heard. He did not appear in the U.S. prints again . . . J. M. Walsh made his sole contribution to *Amazing* with a four-part serial, 'Terror Out of Space', under the pen-name H. Haverstock Hill. And Bernard Brown, B.Sc., popped up again after three years labelled as a British author—one who always eluded me.

Readers native to these islands were, as a rule, easier to track down. So many letters from their British followers were printed in *Amazing* and *Wonder* during 1934-35 that an American fan found it 'distressing', as though it betrayed a lack of interest among his compatriots. *Wonder* went so far as to earmark its August 1935 'The Reader Speaks' department a 'British Edition'. By which time Mr. Gernsback had received ample evidence of the response he had aroused on this side of the Atlantic. Of thirty-six chapters of his Science Fiction League which had been granted their charters up to the time that Standard Magazines became its new sponsors, and the magazine re-named *Thrilling Wonder*, five of these branches were in Great Britain and Ireland.

But it would seem, from one of my own plaintive epistles which appeared in *Amazing*, that I was not content to let 'Uncle' Hugo—who had ignored my plan for a British fan magazine—get too much of a hold on this country's sf buffs. Though by then the SFL was a lusty infant of nine months, I advocated the co-ordination of all British fan clubs, of whatever origin, to further the cause more effectively. What was in my mind primarily, I suspect, was that 'official organ by means of which they could keep in touch.' I was evidently more insular-minded than I would have admitted in those days, however. I still genuinely desired to see a British association of sf readers, working towards an objective peculiar to our own situation, in which sf magazines were an unknown quantity.



*The insignia of Gernsback's Science Fiction League, showing a rocket flight to the Moon. Drawn by Frank R. Paul, it was used as a heading on official membership forms and was also adapted as a lapel button.*

I did not join the League myself until it was over a year old, and then only reluctantly. I still have my membership certificate—and my lapel button, which is none the worse for rare wear. But it was only a few months before the first proposal for an English chapter came from Les Johnson of Liverpool, whose repeated appeals fell on deaf ears; for it was never implemented, as far as League records show. Perhaps the BIS, of which Johnson was secretary and whose members were mostly sf fans, was enough . . .

Early in 1935 Executive Director Forrest J (no period) Ackerman, who rejoiced in the title of World Science Fiction Fan No. 1, made an abortive attempt to get Patrick Enever's SF Association at Hayes, Middlesex, roped in as the League's first foreign chapter, with the idea of its becoming 'one of the leading sf groups in the world.' But Enever reported that his confreres preferred to join up as independent members rather than seek official sanction to form a chapter; so this 'organisation' remained as loosely knit as it had always been. Of all individualists, rugged or not (and the popular conception was of a skinny, weak-kneed adolescent badly in need of the services of the "build a body like mine" merchants), the sf fan is probably the most stubborn.

The first British chapter to actually materialise was at Leeds, where a determined young student named Douglas W. F. Mayer had taken on quite a handful. He announced himself in *Wonder* as secretary of 'a small English science society', the Institute of Scientific Research, which embraced five other organisations including an international correspondence club and two radio research societies. But there was still room for the SFL, which duly appointed him Director of Chapter No. 17. Starting in May 1935, it held regular meetings to discuss space-travel and other topics and show films like 'Metropolis'.

The second branch to be organised in this part of the world was at Belfast. In June 1935 Chapter 22 was

launched at Nuneaton by Maurice K. Hanson and his friends, one of whom, Dennis A. Jacques, distinguished himself by passing the League's Science Fiction Test and gaining the status of a First Class Member. Such erudition was enviable in a field so full of pitfalls, both scientific and literary. By the following March the pair were producing Britain's first fan magazine, its duplicated pages bound together by sewing machine. Starting as *Novae Terrae*, it survived until January 1939, by which time Hanson had moved to London and enlisted Arthur C. Clarke and William F. Temple as his associate editors. Later, it was taken over by Plumstead fan Edward (John) Carnell, who discarded the Latin and, in due course, adopted the title of *New Worlds* for the professional magazine he created and edited for eighteen years.

It was in the scarcely legible pages of *Novae Terrae* that many sf writers and critics of those formative years published their first efforts, and which set the style for a string of amateur magazines that followed in its wake. But this was only after the formation of the original Science Fiction Association, which served to reinforce such individual efforts and mutual interests once members of isolated groups had gravitated towards one another. And it was *Novae Terrae* that inevitably became the official journal of the organisation, the promotion of which I had continued to urge for nearly seven years before the Leeds Chapter of the SFL finally took the initiative by calling a national conference.

Their 'Scientific Fiction' club had received some local publicity (the *Yorkshire Evening Post* must have jibbed at the portmanteau word coined by Gernsback), and they had the advantage of a clubroom where

"Prophetic Fiction is the Mother of Scientific Fact" is written over the door . . . Inside there is a vast array of "science fiction" periodicals. Perhaps it is unfair to stress the American magazines. . . . The "Science Fiction League", as may be guessed from the wording associated with it, originated on the far side of the Atlantic. . . .

The liberal use of quotation marks indicates the mystification, if not complete scepticism, which was typical of the public reaction to American sf thirty years ago. But the *Yorkshire Evening News* was kinder, and more astute. Space-rockets were in the news, and it concentrated on the members' tentative experiments—or preparations for them—in this direction, while acknowledging their 'immense good humour, enthusiasm and vitality'. All of which were evident at the inaugural meeting of the SFA, although there were only six outside delegates: Hanson from Nuneaton, Johnson and Eric Frank Russell from Liverpool, and Clarke, Carnell and myself from the metropolis. Plus approving messages from Professor A. M. Low, John Russell Fearn, and Festus Pragnell.

'NEW BODY TO BOOST SCIENCE FICTION' ran the headline in *Scientificion—The British Fantasy Review*, which I launched in that same eventful month—January 1937. Though I had taken the precaution to



issue a circular intended to test the demand for such a journal, and the results had been disappointing, I had decided to take the plunge, feeling that a printed journal would not only prove more acceptable to the fans but more presentable to the publishers we aimed to convert. And we had a tough job ahead. By this time two prominent firms had considered the project of a British sf magazine, and both had decided against it—after months of deliberations and procrastinations.

In spite of this, *Scientifiction* radiated a breezy optimism, undertaking to provide 'ample evidence that the Era of Science Fiction in England has begun!' And none was more confident than the irrepressible John Russell Fearn, who had been my principal ally in bearding editors in their dens:

'Yes, the outlook for British science fiction is bright. I, for one, have tremendous hopes for its future. It is an absolutely unexplored field, opening up vast possibilities for literature, films, radio—and television! In time to come, if properly exploited, it may be the predominant form of entertainment in the world.'

It was typical of Fearn to stretch the anticipation to the limit; otherwise, the hope might have proved a pretty accurate prediction. And for all the reluctance of the publishers we harried, it was obvious that the climate for sf had become decidedly more auspicious over the past year or two.

Before 1934 had gone out, *Passing Show* had started to serialise the Balmer and Wylie novels 'When Worlds Collide' and 'After Worlds Collide'—already published in America—with some more vivid illustration by artist Fortunino Matania. For me, that was sufficient excuse to concentrate my efforts in the direction of its publishers, the enterprising Odhams. My approaches promptly resulted in an interview with an editorial executive who showed genuine interest in what was, at first, only a hazy proposal for a publication to be called *Tomorrow—Magazine of the Future*, to feature both fiction and articles.

For various reasons, the firm were unable to consider the idea seriously for another twelve months; so I had plenty of time to prepare my scheme more precisely. I spent weeks combing my files of the 'Big Three' magazines in search of stories to serve as illustrations of the sort of material I visualised for presentation, along with articles on space-travel, the insect menace, the end of the world, and similar familiar topics. I made out what I thought was a convincing case for a publication which would be of intense interest to the ordinary reader as well as the sf fan. 'The theme throughout should be the wonderful world in which we live, and how much more wonderful it will be in time to come.' So went my memorandum, which was full of notes on the development of American science fiction and accompanied by a miniature dummy, decorated with snippets of fantastic illustration to give it the authentic flavour.

For years afterwards I would thumb through that

dummy and ponder, like the tragic Weinbaum, the things that might have been. For when it had been in his hands a month, the big executive considering my idea decided it had 'very definite possibilities' but could not be undertaken as a practical proposition "for some considerable time". Other papers would come first when the new plant they were building was ready, and there was still the question of production costs to be gone into. It was, indeed, a *Magazine of the Future*. So I asked for my dummy back.

In the interim, *Passing Show* continued to indulge its flair for the fantastic with 'The Thousandth Frog', by Wynant Davis Hubbard, another American tale about giant insects, and 'The Secret People' by John Beynon, who was instantly recognisable as our old friend Harris of *Wonder Stories*, making his English debut in a big way. The following year he enlarged on his success with 'Stowaway to Mars', hence, the first issue of *Scientifiction* carried an interview with him under the heading, 'He's Converting the Masses!'

Early in 1935 the *Daily Express* serialised Joseph O'Neill's 'Land Under England', a gloomy fantasy knocking the fascist concept of Utopia. Hal P. Trevarthen's 'World D', a much more remarkable tale of a subterranean world built to save the human race from extinction, came at the end of the year, to pass almost unnoticed. More conspicuous, on the screen, was 'The Bride of Frankenstein'; and there were indications that the filming of Wells' 'Things to Come' might start a trend towards the more serious treatment of fantastic themes in the cinema.

Even I was moved to start writing stories again. My last effort, intended for *Scoops*, was abandoned when the twopenny weekly died, and despite my patriotic urgings I was tempted to try my luck in the American market. But after one rejection from Gernsback's protégé Charles D. Hornig—who had just embarked on a New Policy—my journalist's instincts were aroused by my first sight of American fandom's famed *Fantasy Magazine*, evolved from *Science Fiction Digest*. In spite of its manifold misprints and blemishes (the whole thing was hand-set, page by page, by Editorial Director Conrad H. Ruppert), I was impressed by its general air of professionalism, not to mention the status of its contributors. Instantly I felt a burning desire to join them—though I was no Ray Palmer or Mort Weisinger, both of whom progressed to 'prozine' editorship—in order to reflect the developing British scene and gain sympathy for our cause among influential writers and fans.

At first, Managing Editor Julius Schwartz—already science-fiction's best-known authors' agent, including John Russell Fearn's—didn't take kindly to the idea, and returned my initial offering. Then he suddenly changed his mind, and with the July 1935 issue I started to write about past, present and future activities in the British sf field 'On the Other Side of the Pond'. I continued to do so until this most ambitious of all fan magazines—featuring names like C. L. Moore, Seabury Quinn, Ralph Milne Farley, Ray Cummings, and even



The stories of John Russell Fearn were so full of incidents that they lent themselves admirably to colourful illustration; hence he became known as "The Cover Copper". Here are some examples from magazines published in the mid-1930's. (Left to right) "The Man Who Stopped The Dust", 1934; "The Brain Of Light", 1934; "Before Earth Came", 1934; "Liners Of Fire", 1935; "Earth's Mausoleum", 1935; "The Blue Infinity", 1935; "Brain Of Venus", 1937; and "Superhuman", 1937.

the masterly A. Merritt—finally folded in January 1937; presumably because its leading lights, for whom it was a real labour of love, had found more profitable channels for their industry.

The date, you will note, coincides with the first issue of *Scientifiction*, which lasted only fourteen months during which it saw seven sixteen-page issues. (The printing bill, I recall with a sigh, totalled less than half the cost of a single issue today.) Though its circulation was ridiculously small, it proved an eye-opener to many readers and to the publishers on whom it descended, including those whom I finally persuaded to produce a trial issue of *Tales of Wonder*, which kept me too busy for anything else. Less esoteric than *Novae Terrae*, and rather more serious in tone, it was seldom without two or three book reviews and gave all the important news—thanks to its vigilant correspondents.

Schwartz himself contributed a page on 'Transatlantic Topics', and David H. Keller wrote a self-critical piece about his forty years of effort as a literary practitioner. Through its interviews, it also familiarised admirers of their work with Herbert, Pragnell, Fearn and Russell, who by then had made his gusty entrance on the *Astounding* scene. It was to the lively, loquacious Liverpoltian—who had made his presence felt at the

Leeds meet by finding fault with the fans, especially those who bought remainders rather than new copies—that I was indebted for *Scientifiction's* biggest scoop: an interview with philosopher Olaf Stapledon, in the same issue that featured a review of his masterpiece, 'Star Maker', by the meticulous John Beynon Harris. John, too, was most enthusiastic about the magazine. After our first meeting, at which I told him my plans for it, he sent me his subscription—enough to pay the printing bill for the first issue.

Another scoop was a piece of news which very few readers believed, and which even I found difficult to credit. It arrived from American correspondent Willis Conover just as the October 1937 issue was going to press, and since there was no time to check I took a chance and ran it. In the event, it proved true enough—and the most significant news item any fanmag had ever printed. For John W. Campbell, until then one of its leading writers, had taken over the editor's chair of *Astounding Stories*—a move that was to revolutionise science fiction over the next ten years and lift it far above the general level of the 'pulp'.

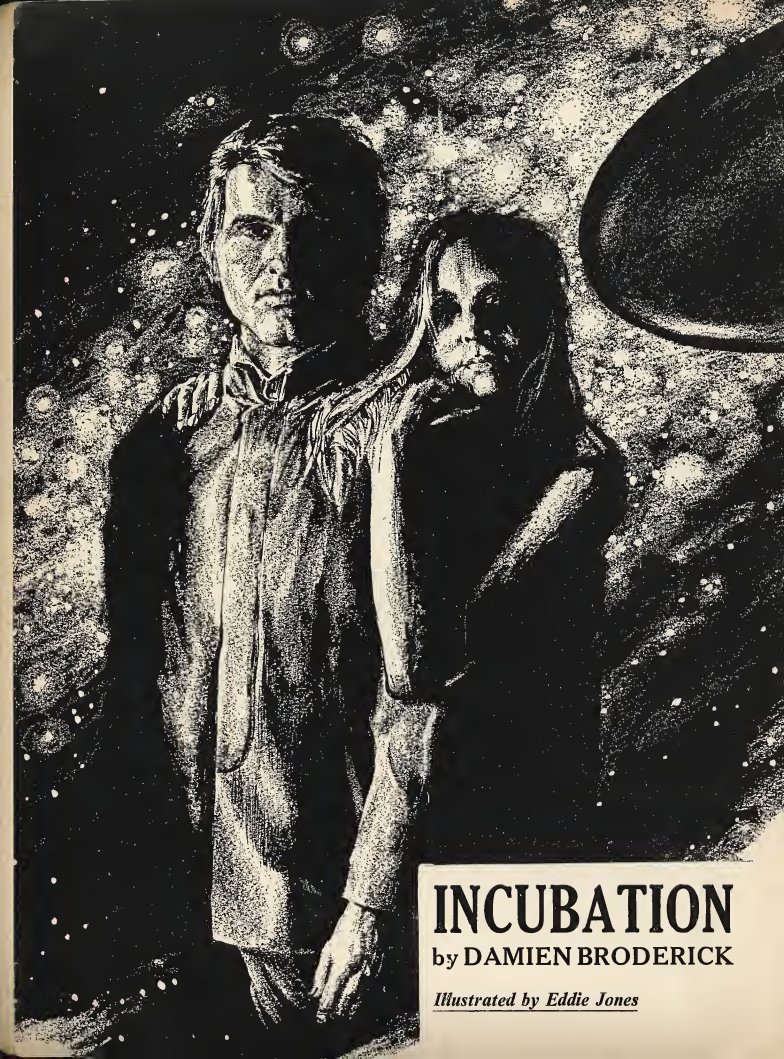
By that time, the first 'one shot' issue of *Tales of Wonder* had been on sale for four months, and I was on tenterhooks awaiting the outcome.



A dramatic scene from the opening instalments of 'The Thousandth Frog' by Wynant Davis Hubbard which appeared in THE PASSING SHOW for June 8th, 1935. It was one of several fantastic serials in the Newnes paper illustrated by the brilliant artist, Fortunino Matania.

## TALES OF WONDER


*(How 'Tales of Wonder' became established as Britain's first sf magazine, and finally fell victim to the paper shortage, will be told in the next issue. Make certain you don't miss it!)*



# INCUBATION

by DAMIEN BRODERICK

*Illustrated by Eddie Jones*



warmth that enfolded her. 'I'm anxious to see some of Patrick White's novels. You see, I've not been here long, yesterday in fact, from Paris.' He let his voice stroke the city's name, evoke the voluptuous mad-wild Paris that hardly exists in reality. And a wisp of illusion caught in her sigh.

Soame smiled engagingly. 'I heard nothing but praise for his work in New York. It seems a nice way to fill out my new experience of Australia, by looking at some of your best literature.'

'Of course,' she managed, still trapped in the net of his brilliant smile. She glanced nervously behind her; the old spinster was not watching them. 'Well,' she said, slipping out from behind the desk, 'I think I can offer you a special surprise.' A door marked *Private* opened for her and he followed, aglow with the old satisfaction.

They came into a dim inlet bay of books, a small hidden atoll of jutting shelves and covered tables.

'The library is preparing a public exhibition of Mr White's work,' she whispered. 'Here, in fact, we have all his original manuscripts ...' Her voice trailed away.

With the air of a world-weary expert, Soame let his eyes drift from books to manuscripts to holograms and tapes. The girl's fresh, animal body pervaded his nostrils with the scent of lust. Vulnerable as a puppet, she waited for firm direction from the strings.

'Fascinating,' he husked, casually replacing a first-edition of *The Aunt's Story*. 'Of course, the insight which literature can offer is ultimately less significant than that which one gains through *people*, the immediate relationships, the role of chance ...' He trailed off, as if reflecting on the thread woven by fate through jet-setting travels. And, after all, there was a thread. With him, crowding his mind, were all the women of his past, the Silver of his future, and this delightful creature of the moment. It was that blend called experience.

'Yes,' she breathed. 'Ah, um, here's an unbound copy of Mr White's new novel ...' She reached up towards the volume, slender arm shaping the light fawn of her sweater. Soame watched her breasts shift and hungered for them. With a trembling hand she offered him the book. He took it, brushing her hand.

'Can I, uh, anything else?' Her breath came in short stabs.

'Thank you, dear,' he murmured, 'no, this has been excellent.'

But he did not move. Close to her face, he held strings of suspense. And he slipped down to her alluring mouth, lifting her face. Full, warm, fired, he structured their lips in a damp unison, an erotic geometry. Angles, tensions tugged her into the whirlpool. His hand lured her arm, smothered her young breast. A shiver rippled her dress.

It pleased him. He had made her alive, everywhere alive, everywhere his. Through her scent, a dewy freshness shook him into an echo of memories.

'My dear,' he said, bending to her face, 'you must have dinner with me some—' But her eyes had skittered away from him, stared in near-terror into the cool reprimand of the plump spinster who stood at the opened door.

He strode like some Cinerama hero in the teeth of a gale, big, relaxed, his grin wide and brilliant. He walked as though the street were there for him, and him alone. At a corner news-stand he bought a morning paper.

He wended his way to the park, relaxed on a favourite wrought-iron bench under the serrated shade of an elm, flicked through the paper. The glaring headline was barely worth a glance: GIANT CHINESE TEST TIPPED. Christ, he thought, the money they squander on ways to kill themselves. He growled in disinterested disgust, turned to the Personal Columns and the business of living.

Four lines leapt up for attention. *Rogel*, he read, *everything different now. Situation finally under control, but we must go. Meet midday, Kings X library. Silver.*

Soame passed his tongue over dry lips, felt the old excitement flutter through his body. This one was perfect. He knew it was perfect, without knowing why it was, or how he knew it.

He reached the library with thirty minutes to spare.

Practically deserted as the place was, he knew already that their eyes were caressing him. A plump spinster peered from her pimpled face between the catalogues. And—ah!—the youngest of them stared from the desk with a naive unashamed innocence that fluted in his blood. She was no more than seventeen. As one would approach a doe, gently, he crossed to her. There was plenty of time to indulge his taste, in part at least, before the fated Silver arrived.

*You lucky girl*, thought Clive Hymes Soame, holding her eyes as he approached, *you beautiful young thing.*

He touched the desk, bent slightly to her. A fine veined throat, delicate copper, inspired the connoisseur in him. She swallowed prettily.

'Yes, sir?'—her soft startled voice. 'Can I help you?'

'I hope so,' and the growl was deep from use, a

"I—I hope this has helped you," the girl stammered, not daring to meet his gaze. 'T'd best, better go.' And she scurried off with burning cheeks.

It did not really upset Soame. He glanced at his watch, moved smoothly back into the body of the library. Still, he would have enjoyed playing the little drama out. The old prude waddled past, and Soame regarded her with cold contempt. She dropped her wrinkled eyes to her wrinkled breast, and he laughed silently, cruelly. She winced, hating his beautiful body, and fled behind the catalogues.

Lunch-hour borrowers had begun to file into the library. Casually, he made his way among them, searching the faces. The woman, his instinct told him, had not yet arrived. His was a precarious game, he thought idly; against time rather than the two other abstract personalities involved. If Silver were late his scheme was lost, blown, just as it would be if the oddly-named Rogel were to come early.

As the clock sliced seconds from the hour, tension paced like a beast he knew and respected. He savoured his controlled fear, tasted it, let the honed edge of habit cut away all superfluous thought.

And she was there.

From the corner of his eye, he saw the woman enter, captured and analysed without conscious effort, the minute keys of stance and attitude which identified her. He breathed evenly, coiled the tension back on itself and closed it away. A clear flexible mind was the prime necessity of this moment; he needed to sum up her character, attune himself to her. He slid unobtrusively toward her. Before anything else, he had to gauge her financial status.

Yet even his experienced clarity had not been prepared for her. The stunning fabulous beauty of the woman brought him up short. Stupid fumbling fingers reached for a cigarette. *A library, fool*, he snarled at himself, dismayed at the near-blunder. Gingerly, struggling for lost composure, he approached her.

'Silver?' he murmured softly. *Rogel's emissary*, urged the posture of his body, the angle of his arm, the carefully-weighted values of his tone. The role was merging with his own instincts and memories, a sense of conviction which came straight from sinew and bone.

'That is right,' she said, voice hushed, puzzled. Somehow in her tone, anxiety raced. But in the half-gloom a radiance remained in her pale features, an ultimate firm confidence. 'Where is Rogel? There is no time to alter the arrangements.'

*Arrangements*. Was this an assignation? A return to a husband? A business matter? The possibilities gridded themselves like a chessboard. Somehow he would have to get the details, or he was lost.

'Regrettably,' Soame said, projecting calm capability, 'there has arisen the need for a small change of plan. I'm here to—' He swept his eyes around the library, lowered his voice still more. 'Look, we can't really talk here. Best we go and talk over coffee. I'll give you a full account then.'

She nodded reluctantly. 'We'll go,' she said, 'to my apartment.' An odd smile touched her lips as she glanced about her. At what? The people, the books? Her English had been too perfect. Her face, too, was perfect, a faultless masterpiece of femininity which defied classification. *Where is she from?* demanded his disciplined mind. There was so much he needed to know.

Gently, he took her arm and guided her to the door. They stepped outside into a cool wind, and drifting leaves lapped their feet. Almost sluggishly, his stunted mind tried to reckon her wealth. Never had there been less cause for worry on that count. Silver passed his test of affluence easily. Better still, in the lack of ostentation about her deep topaz brooch, couched in simple exquisite silver work, there was nothing of the vulgar, suspicious, flashy *nouveau riche*. Her plain tweed jacket impressed Soame—not the material, nor the way it tastefully pronounced firm breasts; the cut spoke eloquently of high-priced fashion. There was the same classic purity in the woollen dress which fell, in the current mode, just above her knees.

Playful wind tossed at her hair, and she lifted sensitive fingers to push back an errant lock. Her hand—jewelled with a single sparkling diamond—her arm, in its wide half-length sleeve, her graceful lithe body inflamed his imagination. Here was the opportunity of a lifetime: money, beauty, grace. Quickly, hand barely at her elbow, Soame guided her to a taxi. Determinedly, he slammed the cab door, settled into the upholstery.

They sat for five minutes in silence while the cab threaded through snarling traffic. A rustle of nyloned knee, a twist of tweed, brought her around to face him. Aesthetic appraisal, appreciation moved her face. With a touch of real pleasure, Soame watched the slight smile which curved her lips. *We're two of the same breed*, he thought: *the beautiful people*.

'What are you calling yourself?' she asked, her voice a song. And it was there again, Soame noted. He could not place the foreign quality.

'I'm Clive,' he said. 'Clive Hymes Soame, from the old world, newly of Australia.' Always, even with a woman seemingly as beyond pretension as this lovely Silver, it paid to get Europe into the picture.

She laughed, a tinkle of joyful melody. 'Such a complicated name.' Then, soberly: 'What of the others? Are they safely under field?'

Soame was lost and sinking. He had not the slightest idea what she was talking about.

'They are, my dear,' he said, holding her gaze, no smallest trace of hesitation in his voice. An open snare, his mind waited ready to snap down on anything which might be a key to this strange, entrancing, rich woman.

'Naturally,' she laughed, shaking her head in self-mockery. 'If they were not, we would not be here, would we?' Gravely, Soame agreed. 'And what of Rogel?' she pressed.

Abruptly, Soame knew what to say. *We must go*, her

notice in the Personal Column had said, and she was obviously still anxious about something. Adding to her indefinitely foreign beauty, her curiously perfect articulation, it was clear that she and Rogel and 'the others' were preparing to leave the country. *Christ, I'll have to pounce, and pounce fast.*

'As you appreciate,' he said carefully, 'the situation is precarious. Rogel felt that he ought to attend personally to final preparations.' In the pupil of her violet eyes curved the calm, urbane features Soame presented her.

'There is,' she quietly agreed, 'a great deal of urgency. Now that I've located the Egg, we must get it away before the weapon test disrupts my control.'

Ignorance sucked like a dreadful whirlpool. Soame was torn inside with terror. A single wrong word would blow the whole goddam scene. He'd waited years for such a victim. His grasping soul itched for her wealth, his jaded sense lusted for her body. And he could feel the prize slipping out of his hands... Sharply, he grabbed self-control.

'Let's not talk about it for the time being.' Soame indicated the cabbie, alert, efficient, and listening. Again she nodded, turned away to view the passing streets. He relaxed, fought the varieties of tension in him.

Still, he couldn't resist her profile, the piquant blossoming lips which had lapsed into silence, the brow that curved increased into ash-white hair. The sun, cooler now in a concrete sky, burned copper into the cascade of that hair. Soame's eyes slipped back to her unblemished cheeks, smooth as satin, her fine high cheekbones that lent fragility to her spirited jaw.

A cool sweat of desire pricked out on his palms. A long life-line there, he had been told once. At this rate he would die within the hour. He forced himself back to business.

'I left Rogel at the airport making final arrangements.' That seemed safe enough. It was in all likelihood damnably close to the truth. If Silver was preparing to leave the country, hammered his mind, even the carefully prepared tale about poor Rogel's 'unfortunate accident' wouldn't hold her for long...

She was looking at him with incredulous amazement. He had, then, said something dreadfully wrong. His stomach butterflied, knotted.

After an intolerable silence, she laughed richly. 'Of course, dear,' she smiled, taking his hand, 'the natives. You seem to have assimilated the local humour. The quaint gigantic lying.' Her eyes shone when she laughed, bright and reassuring. Soame laughed with her, he who had laughed long and loud at the painful wit of old, horrible, redeemingly-rich widows, and he wondered what they were laughing at.

Natives. That was the key. And her foreign aura. And the library. People do not meet in a library, even the cultivated. The answer was gnawing for attention.

Christ, yes. A scholar! No wonder he had taken so long—this beautiful, wealthy creature a scholar? *Perhaps*, Soame sketched in his mind, *she's a member of some ancient landed aristocracy, secure still in their*

*prosperity despite the encroachments of the welfare state.* The scholar-gentry. An anthropologist, perhaps, or a sociologist.

The taxi turned against traffic, stopped before an expensive apartment block.

The apartment confirmed his evaluation of Silver, rich, rich, Silver. *Soame, you lucky devil*, he congratulated himself, *handle this right and you've got it made.* Wide latticed windows gave out to a magnificent view of Sydney Harbour and the arching Bridge with its antlike traffic. Expertly, he cased the flat: two bedrooms, kitchen, the living room where Silver busied herself at the mahogany bar. Her tweed coat was slung lazily on a low tonal purple divan. His mind kept flickering with the image she'd made against the window, slipping out of the coat as he held it; smoothing down her skirt, her head thrown back so that swirling strands had sent white fire through him. The hawk was dangerously close to becoming the prey.

She turned and sang a melody of gay gibberish.

Mental snares snapped tight, held for Soame the knowledge that these were words in a language he had never heard before. In the frozen moment of panic, he raised his eyebrows in mock reproach.

'Let us use the local language,' he scolded, and the touch of whimsy in his reproof was staggeringly adroit. 'It has its own amusing charm.' *Dear God, did I really say that, without hesitation, with only my reflexes to guide me?*

Her lips quirked in acknowledgement. 'Will whiskey do?' she asked. 'For a laugh, as they say. It's growing cool.'

'Fine with me.' Soame watched her shoulders move beneath the violet blouse. 'Anything.' A brown-gold carpet met deep oak walls of vertical boards to a gold and ivory wallpaper. The high ceiling was a soft, almost translucent grey. Subdued lighting touched the room with rose light that mellowed rather than dispelled the dimness. Here, he decided, under the Edwardian ceiling, amid the faded leather of old books, before the colourless seasons of Turner and Constable, he would take her.

She brought whiskey, and captivated him. Her breasts in the rose light were beautiful as she bent with glass in hand as though offering her body in some delicate exotic ritual.

'It is quaint enough, is it not?' She swirled her glass, watched red-gold fire dance.

Almost, lost in a different intoxication, he caught the incredible import of her words. *Quaint? shrilled a distant, numbed awareness. Scotch, quaint? Nobody can be that foreign!* But he was awash with her, and criminal artifice was lost in the darkness of his captivity...

'It took a little while to adapt,' she was saying. 'Still, we are an adaptable race, are we not?'

Soame nodded, clutching at the social gambit. ' Astonishing thing, the survival instinct,' he agreed. She was his gold-spoon girl of the year—of his life. If he played the right cards he could score magnificently.

The flicker of candles threw long shadows against the wall. They danced, music sweeping soft and tantalising. Soame was at ease. He had dined superbly, managed to fend off Silver's anxious questions, and now she spun before him in a chiffon twirl. It floated about her, shifting over perfect limbs. Thin wreaths of blue smoke drifted in the air from a Sobranie left burning in the ashtray. He followed the wreaths through slitted eyes: the smoke symbolised his future, the same soft lazy drift, pregnant with the poignant odour of wealth.

'Mmm,' she sighed from his chest, nuzzling his jacket. 'The sound-tape has stopped. What will we do?'

'Nothing,' growled Soame, 'nothing, my sweet, just dance.'

Long fingers unbuttoned his jacket, a slender white arm slipped along his side. He brushed with his lips the translucent glow of her arm as she traced the muscled flesh of his shoulders.

'You are lovely,' he whispered into her ash-blond hair, 'you prepare a wonderful meal, you dance like a sylph, you're more than a human being deserves to be in this vile world.'

Incredulous, she swept back her head. The pale arch of her neck ravished him even as the wonder in her gaze sent a strange fear through him. And—

'Of course!' Then: her laugh, sweet as water over pebbles. 'Ah, darling, a local saying! Your humour has bite.' Again she nestled against him, brushing his thigh.

Bewilderment misted Soame's eyes. Once more he had floundered beyond his depth. He cringed internally before the enigma she presented. What was his joke? His simple, silly words—trite banalities, utterances without significance—were suddenly yawning chasms, dangerous depths for which he could make no preparation. Desperate, he sought the country of the mute. Her fingers were a fiery pressure, and he drew her to the divan.

Every vestige of control slipped from Soame in that moment. He was lost; for the first time in his adult life he was not the manipulator. The shock was extraordinary. He reeled toward an abyss of unknowledge, a vertigo of jumbled raw sensation. A wonderful sigh swelled in Silver's throat, flowed soundlessly through him. The pain of touch was a rainbow eruption...

All animation stopped. The room froze.

'No,' she cried. It was, in the terrible silence, almost a scream. It wrapped itself like concrete about his abdomen. 'What are we doing? The fields, the Egg! Her violet eyes, as she shuddered, were filled with real terror, and she thrust Soame away from her.

Bewildered, shocked even beyond the sentimentality which had carried him near the edge of remorse, he stood gaping. Furious pressures raged inside him, as if he were a bomb held at the moment of explosion.

Her breathing slowed. 'Not yet,' she said, with surprising softness. 'Tomorrow night, when we are gone.' Her face held the sadness of happiness recalled in sorrow. 'You're too beautiful,' she moaned. 'It hurts. I'll have to turn you off.'

And her eyes seemed to glow magenta, fierce and troubled. Soame felt a new pressure, a tiny tearing agony, like some obscene torture. Any icy, psychic wave grew, raced dripping wet through his blood.

Silver's cool tones, sharp and clear, echoed in the colder vault of his raped soul.

'That was dangerous, my sweet.' Smooth as marble, her beautiful features were raised to him. Somewhere, beyond the room, there was a dull ticking.

'My God,' Soame shrielled, barbs in his throat. 'Baby, what happened?'

She passed a hand wearily across her brow, and her mood changed to irritation. 'You've really been an observant boy, haven't you?' she snapped, not looking at him. Her lips were pale where the muscles caught tight. 'But please, I've had enough of the indignities tonight. I'm too lonely and too vulnerable. I want home and I want you. So please—'

He didn't understand. He *could* not. What the hell was he doing standing here if she was so lonely, vulnerable? Soame eyed her with a dispassion that was incredulous, and could not deny the psychic castration she has somehow worked on him. And the anger grew, anger out of impotence and ignorance and the pain of humiliation. Blood pounded in his ears, and beyond that was the ticking, the shuddering grinding metronome which hadn't been in the room before that appalling instant.

Silver's scream, when it did come, was a terrible piercing thing of grief and the very taste of blood as it tore her throat. Her face leapt before him.

She was gone; and stood in front of him.

Blanching, she held out a black ovoid in her hands.

It riveted his eyes. It seemed to suck light from the room. It thundered in his mind with a terrible beat. He was cold and put his fingers in his mouth, and was very afraid.

She held the thing, the muscles of her arms starkly taut and they were not what held it, and the shuddering beat died away, was contained.

'What we nearly did!' Her chill voice came shaken to him. 'I ought not to have lost control, even for a moment. But I had expected to be out of this planet by now. We should already have had it in the null-field.' She turned distraught eyes on Soame. 'We *must* go to the ship now. I have lost face with the Egg; I doubt that I am capable of containing it much longer without field-force assistance. And we have to get it out anyway, before the megabomb finally triggers its memory.'

The words fled over Soame's mind. In terror, he pointed at the black thing she seemed to be calling the Egg. 'What is it?' he screamed. 'Christ, what *is* it?'

The woman stumbled back from him. 'No,' she howled, and he was lashed by an impact greater than the words of her mouth, 'no, you're so beautiful,' as though a rent had opened in her soul, and the furious incredulity of her very thoughts was roaring this hurricane about his mind, 'no human could be so—'



Like a badly-matched stereo, Soame saw himself against the image of Silver's face, saw, through the torrent of strangeness that poured from her opening soul into his, the transfixed stupidity in his face, his stance, caught the incomprehensible truth which smashed at her in that blurry blinding moment. 'Earthing!' she screamed. 'Worm!'

Her hand hung before him, ripped down, furrowed, raked his flesh. He stood bleeding and dumb like a whipped mule.

'Where is Rogel?' she cried. It singed the edges of his consciousness, fried him until he seemed aflame in her fury. The drumming, humming beat grew again, pounded as her control slipped. 'What have you done with Rogel?'

For the eon of a minute the name clanged in his head and meant nothing, made no connection in the broken dynamo of his skull. He whimpered, and the angry beat said *Rogel Rogel Rogel* in neat bars.

'I don't know him, I never saw him, never met, never saw, never ...'

Silver screamed through the thunder of the Egg, an alien hysteria that brought vomit to his mouth. There was again the magenta glow in her beautiful eyes, Soames saw it despite the wild astigmatism in his clouded sight. It was more than fury, more than fear, wonderful, vast, a stature of Lear and Oedipus in those eyes, a ground-quaking, venomous, magnificent, futile torment.

'Death,' she said. She thrust the black crystalloid form at him. It hummed and glowed jet as coal. 'Death, Earthing, in cupped hands.'

The man's eyes were trapped in its blackness, his sight ruptured, for the dark thing was still and silent in her arching hands for all that it beat a crashing smashing, booming tobbing convulsion that should have leapt like a heart in her naked grasp. And the edges of her soul were leaking out again, cutting through the fibres and fabric of his ravaged parts:

*She looked across the street-light jewels of the city which enslaved her. Too late for Rogel to reach her. And how could he find her, now that they had missed their rendezvous? For the essence of their mission denied them the use of parasensory contact, demanded that she work alone in her cocoon of desolation until the Egg be found and restrained. And now, indeed, it was too late to bind the Egg those several days required to renew contact with Rogel and the ship, wherever in the city it was. Golden tears hung in her eyes, tears for herself and the end of immortality, tears for stupid, primitive, doomed mankind.*

The flaming mosaic of her awareness fused against the fragments of Soame's shattering personality, welded them to the shape of a resonating fork to her anguish, the paradox strangeness of her reality, the sharp poignance of her resolve. He rang her dirge:

*Perhaps there would be time to warn Rogel, time to have the spacecraft wrap emergency protective energies about itself. She would lay herself bare, open out her*

*mind in one last moment of mental unity with her people. And, in the doing of it, she would perforce loosen her last tenuous psionic restraint on the Egg, permit the end of its incubation. For it would hatch at any moment. Already the megaton flare was igniting beyond the horizon, already were those barbaric scientists sending their unwitting final instruction to the Egg's pseudogenetic core, already was it beyond her endurance to contain it for any longer than mere minutes more. At least she could warn her companions.*

In her hands, death hummed and glowed black as coal, and still Soame cowered in the dementia of his terror without understanding the magnitude of his final betrayal. The superhuman, poignantly-mortal creature standing above him looked down in something that was nearly pity.

'You don't realise, do you, my poor earthing slug?' Her voice was distantly calm. 'This piece of hell, this crystal Egg, this fragment of destruction from the black depths between the universes—it has lain harmless on the face of your planet for three thousand years.'

Soame whimpered, crawling in the jaws of death.

'Your bombs,' she said, 'began its incubation. We have been seeking it for twenty years on your planet, to bind it, for unconstrained it gorges on energy. It will suck your world dry, it will blacken the hot core of your green Earth. It will eat your sun.'

His voice, rough as rope: 'Who are you?'

'We are the Seekers, the Binders.' Silver's eyes filled again with remembered pain. 'Our star is far away in space and time, a twisted ember. Your world will die like ours, for I cannot hold the Egg much longer. Its nuclear enzymes have called it from sleep to a furious reawakening.'

Like a bounding, bouncing echo her voice fell into the chill eternity of frozen portraits from her soul. Soame looked as she looked at the ruined, mindless animal at her feet. 'You were too perfect,' she whispered, 'too much like us to behold. And I dared not touch your mind for fear of disturbing the Egg.' The goddess made a harsh bark that was lost in the thunder of the hatching doom she held. 'I thought you were one of the young ones born on the ship while I roamed this world seeking the Egg.'

'But I will warn the others.' Her eyes flared magenta flame, her lips twisted like jagged shrapnel.

*Intense, shattering an instant of time, her mind speared a darkness deep as the darkness of the Egg. She found Rogel and her people (the clear tinkling minds of the new-born panged, and she knew a flooding joy in her sacrifice); they waited, puzzled and tense, in the ship.*

*'Go, go,' Silver cried, and felt a last moment of warm, sorrowing union before crashing energies locked the starship into safety.*

There was a roaring in the room, a leaping incandescence as the Egg sucked light into itself.

And there were no human beings, there was no Earth, to see the sun give itself up.

# Life of the Party

William F. Temple



BY EDDIE JONES

San Remo.

Sea and sky reflected each other's Mediterranean blue. They were in serene harmony. So were Don and Greta. They lay relaxed, at peace.

The mid-afternoon sun struck white heat from the stucco-encased Casino up on the parade behind them. They had plundered that palace and exhausted its lure for today. The wad of easily won 5000-*lire* notes was too thick for Don's wallet; he'd stuffed it in Greta's beach-wear bag.

They celebrated the big killing with more than a few stregas. Then dissolved some of the muzziness in seawater, swimming, splashing, laughing. Greta's eyes were quite as blue as the sea and the sky. Brightly, they commented: this is what life is for. This is what it's all about. Don't go looking for a bluebird; *be* a bluebird.

Don agreed—now. He hadn't always—far from it. He had very nearly turned down *Consort's* commission to cover a typical world spree of Mannheim's Jet Set.

'Doesn't Mannheim know there are millions starving in India?' he frowned.

'Probably; he starved as a kid himself in Brooklyn,' said the features editor.

'Then why does he squander money on senseless binges like this?'

'Probably because one time he starved in Brooklyn,' said the editor shrewdly. 'All right, Don, so you don't want to go along just for the ride. Fine. I want to get away from the usual travelogue. Let's make this "significant". Not all *Consort's* readers are shallow. Believe it or not, a lot of them have hearts—beating, if not bleeding, somewhere under their mink. Reach those hearts. You might even titillate their social consciences. Get Mannheim's views on what he thinks the Good Life should be. But remember *your* views aren't worth a dime until you've actually seen what goes on. And maybe not afterwards, either. We're not paying for your opinion. Your job's to get the material and let it speak for itself. Yes or no?'

Don hesitated for ten seconds: a fair sop to conscience.

'Yes'.

Then he haggled over the price. Expenses didn't enter into it: Mannheim picked up all tabs, always. Don got within 2000 dollars of what he'd asked for. They settled at that.

'That nudges our record,' said the editor after three minutes on the hot line to the vice-president. 'Maybe you'll wind up handling Mannheim's deals for him.'

Don left, a little ashamed but more than a little happy.

Now here he was, after Bermuda, London, Le Touquet, Monte Carlo—with Portofino, Athens and Cairo yet to come—lying on a beach on the Italian Riviera with Mannheim's daughter, in love with her and with life. Corrupted by the Jet Set? No, he told himself. They were harmless, except sometimes to themselves through over-indulgence. They made money but they were open-handed with it. Money was meant to flow, and they let it flow. The real enemies of society were the misers, the mean, the dreary hoarders. They wanted a

world as petrified and grey as themselves.

Mannheim's Set, at least, was a fun-loving party and Greta was the life of it. She loved everybody. That included him. So for the moment, anyway—and the Set lived only for the moment—Don was happy.

The beach was pebbly. They'd inflated a double lilo to sunbathe on. Greta, her tanned flesh still damp, was dozing. Don was nearly so, regarding the empyrean with half-closed eyes.

So high that he couldn't hear its engines, a twin jet was infinitely slowly scoring two white grooves across the dark blue vault. It was heading south-west towards the scorching shores of North Africa.

Don's eyes closed. He felt himself sinking into the lap of sleep, and fought against it. Damn those stregas! He hadn't written a word of his stint for the day. His professional conscience pricked him. He must get started. He forced his eyes to open. They focussed again on the high vapour trails.

Just the trails.

For the sunlit mote of the plane, which had looked like a silvery flying ant, was no longer visible. The odd thing was that the trails had stopped short at the zenith, making no headway. Far to the north-east their tails weakened and drifted. But the leading lengths remained sharp, compact, and dead straight. It was as though giant scissors had severed them neatly from the plane.

But where was the plane now?

Don searched that patch of the sky. The plane couldn't have flown far in the few seconds his attention had been off it. If its engines had stopped, it must be gliding down. Even if it had turned and was no longer directly reflecting the sunlight, he should be able to see it as a dark speck—he tended to be long-sighted.

But he couldn't locate it. Apart from the beheaded trails, the air was empty.

Just once before, long ago, he was baffled like this. He was a schoolboy meandering home. He heard a shriek of brakes and a rending crash around the next corner. He hurried to the corner. And there was nothing to see except an old lady tottering along otherwise deserted Blake Street. She was undisturbed. Obviously, she'd heard nothing.

Next day, same time, same spot, he heard the same thing. He went to the corner. A few yards from it a Buick convertible was wedged in the gap it had made in a garden fence. Its unhurt driver was leaning out, bawling at a dog.

Don passed him silently, numbed by the realization. Somehow, he'd taken a brief step through a hole in Time. And it was frightening.

From then on, without formulating it in words, he accepted that the hard, visible, three-dimensional world around him wasn't the whole of reality. The universe was far more complex and mysterious. When you least expected it, you could cross the frontier into unknown territory. A sort of Looking-Glass Land where cause and effect didn't seem to be linked.

It made your head swim. And for a short while the

'real' world seemed just like so much stage scenery.

Now he was experiencing it again. He was sitting on a mere plastic mock-up of a beach. The sea was just back projection, the sky a cyclorama. Dummies sprawled under striped beach umbrellas—props, all of them. Even Greta, her bosom rising and falling with each slow breath, was a kind of sideshow exhibit, a fake Sleeping Beauty.

He closed his eyes, massaged them gently. He was trying to kid himself he was rubbing the sleep from them. It was an evasion and he knew it. There were thin spots in the fabric of the world of Man.

Supposing something antagonistic broke through from out there...?

Normality returned slowly. Should he awaken Greta and tell her? Siesta time had drugged the beach. No one else seemed to have noticed the phenomenon. He could produce no witness. Stratospherical winds had blurred and were dispersing the silent evidence of the vapour trails.

He hesitated and let the moment go. Greta was an extrovert. Nothing inexplicable had ever happened to her. She accepted this world at its face value. She would laugh and tell him to lay off strega for a bit.

It was strange. They saw through different eyes and yet they seemed to share so much. Was this love—or infatuation?

He sighed, reaching for his notebook. It hadn't been designed as a day-to-day diary but that was what it had largely become. It was meant to be his source-book for the long *Consort* piece but was increasingly infused with his personal feelings for Greta. He resolved to cut all that out.

He found it tough. He tried to set down the bare facts of last night's fancy dress party. But there was Greta, in his memory, hogging the stage. A masked ballerina, solemnly parodying Pavlova's Dying Swan routine.

He tried to write up the trial run of his new roulette system this morning. All he could see was Greta flipping a blue chip, pretending it was a coin, muttering 'Heads' and placing it anxiously on Red Eleven as though it were her last and ruin was in sight.

Ridiculous. Nothing concerned her less than money. And because it didn't matter, she usually won.

Blessed are the light of heart, for they shall see life, thought Don, doodling in the margin.

The Set was below strength: a mere seventeen of them on this trip. It made no difference. Mannheim had taken over the entire hotel, as usual. In bright evening gowns or dinner suits, they gathered in the dining hall, which was all gilt and white. Nymphs and shepherds, who had witnessed royal banquets here, gazed down at them from the painted ceiling.

Everyone milled around, waiting for Mannheim. It was a rule that no one sat before he came. He made the rules. What you did outside the framework of them he didn't care. But in the Army and now in the board-

rooms, he'd learned the value of discipline. Good times could get out of hand and spoil enjoyment for everyone. There must be just the right touch on the reins. So you dressed for dinner and you were punctual—or you were out of the Set on your neck.

Mannheim arrived. He wasn't late—he never was—but he always gave the impression of being so. He tried to stride like an emperor but wasn't built for striding. His legs were too short. They couldn't keep up with his impetuous, thrusting chest. So he always entered a room as though he were about to break into a run.

He took his place at the head of the table, making a sign to the wine waiters. Greta then sat at his right hand, where her late mother had always sat. Precedence was observed. Don was way down the table, in the leas, between an upstart TV producer and an abstract painter who was taking his time over being discovered.

Mannheim addressed them. His voice was almost as rich as he was. It, at least, was fitting to an emperor.

'I should like us now to drink a toast to absent friends.'

Eyebrows were raised, just a respectful little. This was unusual. But everyone drank.

'In case you're wondering—which you are—you've just drunk to Andy Simon's Crew,' Mannheim explained.

A murmur passed around the table. The Crew were friendly rivals to Mannheim's Set. Their paths sometimes crossed hilariously. But they were rivals.

So there was puzzlement, and Greta voiced it. 'Why Andy's Crew, Dad? They're not all that absent. Just a hop away—splashing about up there in Lake Como. Last I heard, anyhow.'

'Your pigeon must have been tired, Greta. There's such a thing as radio, even if I'm the only person who bothers to listen to it. The Crew took off from Milan Airport this afternoon, bound for Algiers. Radio contact was broken suddenly. It's presumed they crashed in the Med. Nothing's been heard from them.'

'Oh dear,' said Greta. 'Poor Andy. Poor Crew.'

A thought struck Don. He called along the table: 'Say, Manny, would that route have taken them in this direction?'

He wasn't as well-travelled as the rest. European geography hadn't jelled for him yet.

Mannheim eyed him sharply. 'Yes, it would. They would have crossed the coast around here. Why do you ask?'

'Well, I saw—or thought I saw—something damned queer this afternoon. There was a jet flying over, very high, heading out to sea. And all at once, it vanished. Just wasn't there any more.'

The Set focussed its curiosity on him. There was complete silence. It unnerved him. He put up a lame defence. 'Well, that's how it seemed to me. I was just wondering if there could be a connection.'

'Anyone else see what you saw, Don?' Mannheim asked.

'I don't know. I didn't ask.'

'All right, I'll ask for you—now.' He looked inquir-

ingly along the table. 'Anyone?'

Some looked blank. Others shook their heads.

'Looks like you're the only one who saw that, Don.' Mannheim paused, then added unexpectedly: 'Except for myself.'

Don felt relief. 'You too?'

'Yes. You'd have thought hundreds of people would have noticed it. But they take their siesta period seriously in these parts. Even the *carabinieri* were asleep: when I rang their H.Q. to check on any reports, they thought I was trying to start up a hoax. So I shut up. I thought maybe I could have had a touch of the sun, at that. So I'm glad you mentioned it. Obviously it happened, sure enough, and it looks as though it happened to the Crew. Where the hell did they go? Did a flying saucer gobble them up? Did you see any other craft around in the sky, Don?'

'No. I looked hard. I'm sure there was nothing.'

'Why didn't you tell me about it, Don?' Greta asked, reproachfully.

'You were asleep. And—well, it was just too crazy. For instance—' He described the truncated vapour trails.

Mannheim was nodding. 'Just the way I saw it. Right, then, my friends, I think the Set should look into this, don't you?'

Mannheim had got where he was because challenges excited him. He rubbed his hands briskly, ready to take on this one.

'Look into it? What with—a telescope?' That was the Hon. John Driscoll, making a joke and a valid point at the same time, as he often did.

Someone laughed, and commented 'Hon. John's right. Where do we begin to look?'

Mannheim said calmly: 'Surely that's obvious? At the point where the Crew's trail ended—the vanishing point. I'll get the details of their course—bearing and height—from the Airport Control. We'll follow it precisely in our plane and see what happens. If anything.'

'Nothing will, I trust,' said the abstract painter at Don's elbow, seizing a chance to call attention to his existence. 'I don't see any mystery. The Crew's plane just blew up, disintegrated in mid-air. Jets sometimes do that, unfortunately.'

Mannheim shifted his gaze to Don. 'Did you hear an explosion? See any falling wreckage?'

Don shook his head. 'It didn't happen like that.'

Mannheim gave the painter no further attention. He announced: 'The schedule is hereby changed. Greece and Egypt can wait. Tomorrow we make for Milan, then fly back along that same course for Algiers. Make your arrangements accordingly.'

'Make your wills, too, while you're at it,' Greta said in deep, dire tones—a mock Cassandra. 'And now eat, drink and be merry, everybody, for tomorrow . . . help!'

Tycoons ordain and employees complain. The employees of Bluebird Jets complained about overtime pay. Their complaints were rejected. They struck.

Mannheim's private plane was a Bluebird. It fractured an undercarriage component landing at Milan. He greased palms and pulled strings to small avail. Over a week went by before he could get the component replaced.

The Set had soon exhausted the night-spots of Milan. They were skiing happily in the Aosta Valley when Mannheim rounded them up and herded them back to Milan. He'd fixed take-off time at the identical minute Andy's Crew had taken off nine days before. The Set soared up into a similar sky, clean and blue. Mannheim was in the co-pilot's seat, navigating.

Greta had a new toy—a mandoline she'd picked up in a Milanese junk shop. She strummed it, singing *Santa Lucia*. In the half-empty plane, the Set were gathered around her, joining in the passages they knew. Wine bottles were circulating.

While they were aware that Mannheim took this venture seriously, none of them did any more. The nine days' wonder had failed to last nine days. It was too bad about the lost Crew, for whom the search had been called off. They had gone to another, but not necessarily better, world. However, they had had a good time in this one, while they lasted.

Don sat apart, revising notes.

Bellita, a redhead who fancied him but was wary of Greta, came and looked over his shoulder. She was a trifle tipsy.

'Clever boy! Don't forget to spell my name with two 't's.'

'I wonder if it matters. I've an odd feeling that no one may ever read what I write.'

'A premonition? We're going to crash? Not a bit of it, Don. That's just your silly old death-wish bobbing up again. You writers are morbid beasts.'

Don glanced ahead through the window. The horizon looked as though it had been ruled with vividly blue fountain-pen ink. The Mediterranean again.

He murmured: 'You never saw what Manny and I saw.'

She stroked the nape of his neck soothingly. 'Don't get like Manny. Once he gets an idea fixed in his head, it takes charge of him. He's obsessed.'

'If he weren't made that way, you wouldn't be drinking his champagne now, Bellita. He'd be a nobody. Excuse me.'

He got up and went forward. Something skimmed past his chin. Greta had flicked her plectrum at him. He grinned back at her, then eased himself into the pilot's small cabin.

'Hello, Don.'

Mannheim had half his attention on the altimeter. The other half was distributed over the surrounding air-space and the coastline just beyond the Maritime Alps.

'TK-3. Roger. Over,' said the steady-eyed, middle-aged (late Air Force) pilot, answering a voice confined in his earphones.

Don said: 'Be honest, Manny. There's no logical reason why we shouldn't fly straight on to Algiers.'

Lightning never strikes twice in the same place.'

'That's a fallacy—sometimes it does, in another storm. Now you try being honest. Don't you feel in your bones it's going to happen again?'

'All right. Yes, I do.'

'Me too,' said Mannheim.

There was now nothing more to be said or done—except to wait.

The coastal hills were wrinkles edging the vast blue plain of the sea. They moved steadily nearer. Then, all at once, there was San Remo, looking small enough to be picked up between thumb and finger. The Casino was a white dot among other white dots.

This is that afternoon in reverse, thought Don. I was down there, looking up. Now I'm up here, looking down.

His grip tightened on the back of Mannheim's seat.

San Remo edged its way under the plane's nose, under its backwards wings, drifted slowly away behind the tail-plane. And they were miles out over the sea, and it was the same sea over which the Romans and Carthaginians had sailed and battled.

Throughout, the singing had continued to sound through the door-rack. Nothing had changed, not even the song—*Santa Lucia* was getting an encore.

Don sighed. 'It was only someone walking over our graves, after all. What now? Do we turn back?'

'No,' said Mannheim. 'Never turn back.'

Don had been back with Greta and the rest for some time. They were playing a merry and rather lewd game of 'I Spy.'

'Your turn, Hon. John,' said Bellita. 'But this time try to keep it clean.'

'I spy with my little eye . . . land ahead.' Driscoll pointed to the horizon ahead. It was a sepia line, thickening gradually. Details emerged: a narrow beach of white sand and behind it a spreading wilderness of brown sand with patches of grey rock.

The Hon. John Driscoll frowned at it. 'I spy, etcetera, a place where the coast road just *ain't*. We're off the map, I think, and here be dragons.'

Don looked at him sharply. Greta, peering out, said: 'You're so right, Hon. Someone's rolled up the coast road and made off with it.'

Driscoll studied the panorama again. 'No, I'll take a bet it's not Algeria. Nor Tunisia, either, come to that. Both have a coast road. Friends, Manny's not only lost us—he's lost Africa, too.'

Don had a suspicion that Mannheim hadn't lost the way—he'd found it. He pushed his way past Driscoll to the pilot's cabin. The pilot, calm but perplexed, was watching the airspeed indicator. Don noticed that the compass needle was doing its limited best to point to the zenith.

Mannheim flashed a smile over his shoulder. He was vindicated, he had a major problem to lick, he was happy.

'You like playing Riddles, Don? When is Africa not Africa?'

'When it's not where it's supposed to be.'

'Correct. By my reckoning, the Dark Continent has moved close to eighty miles north to meet us.'

'But it didn't bring the coast road with it,' said Don.

'As Jim here pointed out, too. So maybe it's not Africa at all. Some theorists site Atlantis hereabouts. Maybe it's just arisen from the deeps. Must have been wrapped in polythene to keep it that dry. Seriously, though, what do you think?'

Don didn't answer. His keen sight had picked up a distant feature just becoming discernible. It was a white cube, like a sugar lump. Allowing for perspective, it was in fact huge. Apart from a gleaming silver arrow lying near it, it stood in solitude amid hundreds of square miles of flat wasteland.

The pilot detected it also. His interest became professionally concentrated on the arrow. He said into his mike: 'TK-3 calling Milano Control. TK-3. We have located Mr. Andrew Simon's plane: TK-3 to Milano—did you get that? Over.'

He waited, listening. Then he said: 'Still no reply, sir. The air's dead.'

'Forget it, Jim,' said Mannheim. 'Radio isn't going to help us any more than it helped Andy Simon. Put her down near that gasoline station, if you can.'

He called it that only because he had to call it something. It was like a giant concrete blockhouse except that it lacked even observation slits. They circled it, spiralling down. They detected a small doorless opening in one wall, at ground level, but that was all. The doorway was black with contained shadow. Nothing that lived and was larger than a snake was visible anywhere around.

Jim landed the jet a hundred yards from the blockhouse. He had no problem. The terrain was one vast runway.

Mannheim, urging Don gently ahead of him, returned to the main cabin.

'Now listen, friends. We've followed the Crew's trail into unknown territory, just as I hoped to do. Yes, that's their plane out there. There's no one in it so far as we can see. The big query is: where's the Crew now? If they're inside that block—whatever it is—why didn't they come out to give us a cheer? The Crew's always glad to see us, and I'd have thought they'd be trebly glad to see us here. *Ergo*, either they're not in there or they're imprisoned in there. The only way to find out is to go and look, and I'm going to do just that.'

'Without a gun, Manny?' Driscoll looked serious. There was a time when he hunted big game but slaughter for sport at last sickened him. He abandoned it. He wouldn't have been admitted to the Set otherwise. For Mannheim respected all life, human or animal, and wouldn't tolerate the presence even of a firearm in his Set.

'Without even a tomahawk, Hon, which I imagine would be of just as little use in this set-up. I don't know



who or what we're up against but it isn't any tribe of Apaches.'

'I'm coming with you,' said Driscoll.

'No. I want you to take over if I don't come back. Give me thirty minutes. If I haven't shown up by then, tell Jim to fly you all back along the same course—as far as he can judge it. I'm afraid the instruments have gone somewhat haywire. But you may hit the home trail if you head straight out to sea and keep going.'

'Right,' said Driscoll, knowing that Mannheim's orders were indisputable.

Greta said: 'Sue's put her clumsy big foot through my mandoline. My musical career's blasted. I haven't a thing to do. So I'll come with you, Dad.'

'That you won't, my dear. You *do* have a thing to do. And that's to produce sons to keep my business in the family. So save your energy for that.'

'Let me come, Manny,' Don said. 'Give me a chance to write something worthwhile.'

Mannheim appraised him briefly. 'Okay.'

Greta cried: 'How am I going to produce sons if Don doesn't come back? I can't do the job alone.'

'Be patient and maybe science will come up with an answer,' her father grinned. 'Now, you just sit still and be a bad girl. Hon, I'm holding you responsible. Come on, then, Don.'

Mannheim flung open the exit door. A shaft of bright sunlight shot in together with a wave of icily cold air. Mannheim swore and slammed the door shut.

'This sure isn't the Sahara—it's more like the Antarctic. Let's get some warmer clothing.'

They dug out their ski-suits and, kapok-insulated, ventured out into that world of glaring sunshine and bitter cold. The ground was concrete-hard. There was a tang in the air like lemon peel.

'No, this isn't the Sahara,' Mannheim said again. 'It isn't even Earth, I fancy.'

Don glanced back. Greta, at a window, breathed on the glass and with a lightning forefinger drew a caricature of his face. He smiled but felt a little sad. Really, she's only a child, he told himself. She can't take anything seriously and that only as it comes. Whether or not I come out of this isn't bothering her overmuch. Certainly her old man isn't concerned about my skin or his either. Everything's a kind of game to the Mannheims. I don't understand them—they're from another planet.

Maybe this planet . . . which Mannheim believes isn't Earth.

Their way took them by the Crew's plane. Its door was open and the gangway still in place. They took a look inside. It was empty. There was frost on the seats.

They went on. The sides of the blockhouse reared above them like cliffs of white marble, well over a hundred feet high. Mannheim's impetuous gait took him into the dark open doorway ahead of Don, who was in no such hurry. Don caught up with him a few yards along the passage, where there was pale light percolating through what appeared to be a thick sheet of frosted

glass let into the walls and completely sealing the passage.

Mannheim stood there, listening. But there was no sound from beyond the barrier.

He said: 'Odd, isn't it? Doesn't look like a door—no handle or anything. Maybe it's a sliding panel.'

He reached out to touch it. Before he could, a shadow passed slowly across its far side and was gone.

'What was that?' Don whispered.

Mannheim was not so awed. His voice boomed and echoed in the passage. 'Looked to me like the shadow of a man. *Someone's* in there, anyhow.'

His fingers touched the translucent screen and went right into it. His whole hand followed, up to his wrist. He exclaimed. 'Hell, it's not solid at all! Feels like liquid jelly.'

He thrust his arm through up to the elbow, then the shoulder. He groped.

'My hand's out through the far side. And it's a damn sight warmer in there than it is out here.'

He withdrew his arm, felt it, examined it as best he could in the dim light.

'It's perfectly dry,' he said, surprised. 'Here, I'm going through. Follow me—if I don't stick halfway and suffocate in the stuff.'

He took a deep breath and plunged into the barrier. It was as though he had dived into a vertical sheet of water. It closed up behind him. He became a shadow on the far side, beckoning.

Don held his breath, shut his eyes, and plunged. There was scarcely any resistance. It was like walking through a wall of foam. And then he was standing beside Mannheim in what looked like the foyer of a major Opera House. In the sharp, glittering light of crystal chandeliers, reflected from wall mirrors which marched up a crimson-carpeted grand staircase, a fountain played in an alabaster pool set in a floor of many-coloured mosaic.

But there were no attendants, no pay-box, no patrons. They were alone with their bewilderment.

'Seems you were wrong, Manny. This could only be somewhere on Earth—in Italy, like as not.'

'You think so? Then how do you account for that slab of goo behind you? It's obeying physical laws we know nothing of. Anything of that consistency should be oozing on the floor. Yet it keeps erect and even coheres again if you disturb it. No, believe me, son, we're a long way from Mother Earth. Now let's see what's up there.'

Mannheim went eagerly up the stairs two at a time. The spacious landing at the top was semi-circular. Three equi-spaced cream panelled doors were set in its tapestried walls. Their golden handles were wrought in the shape of coiled snakes. Mannheim studied the doors as he waited for Don to catch up.

'I reckon that fellow whose shadow we saw went through one of these. I wonder which—right, left or centre?'

'Centre,' said Don, just to show how he could be as

decisive as any tycoon. And, anyhow, it was the nearest door.

Mannheim spun the handle and shoved the big door open.

The man they sought could have been any one of five dozing—or seeming to be—each in his own massive, shiny black armchair.

This room was a contrast to the Italianate entrance hall. It was low-ceilinged and floored with off-white, deep carpet. The pinewood walls were hung with Impressionist paintings. It had no visible form of artificial lighting. Sunlight streamed in through the room-wide picture window which—incredibly—framed a view of palm trees, a terrace with green marble balustrades, and a golden beach beyond it spreading to a blue-green sea speckled with the diverse colours of the sails of small boats.

Mannheim and Don looked at it, then at each other.

'This is ridiculous,' said Don.

'Preposterous.' Mannheim strode up to the nearest chair and stared into the face of its occupant. This was a pale, collapsed-looking man, possibly fifty, with dark shadows around his closed eyes. His nose was so pinched that it was doubtful whether he could breathe through it. Anyhow, he wasn't trying to but noisily sucking air with his slack, half-open mouth, depressed at the corners by deep lines from his nostrils.

Mannheim said: 'Look here, Don. Recognise this man?'

Don went over. 'No.'

'It's one of Andy's Crew. Charlie Gold, looking ten years older and pretty sick. I'd take him for his elder brother, except that he doesn't have an elder brother.'

Mannheim made a slow circuit of the others, surveying them.

'Heinie Wurtz, Bo Chandler, Guido Mazzoni, Somebody Kydd, and this bald guy—don't think I know his name. All members of the Crew. All full of life, as I remember them. And now look at 'em. Sleeping the day away like a lot of fossilised clubmen. Not one of them looks well.'

'What hit 'em?'

Don just shook his head. He went to the big window. This was real glass and there was no way through to the terrace. He studied the view. He knew it couldn't be real because this odd building was surrounded by desert land, but it certainly looked real and three-dimensional enough. The far-off boats sped before or tacked against a breeze and he could detect the small dots of heads above the gunnels.

Mannheim dismissed it with a cursory glance. 'Some kind of advanced back-projection. Let's go find Andy and get the story from him. I'm afraid we'd be wasting our time trying to wake his friends here.'

They returned to the landing and tried the door to the right. A chorus of female voices, backed by guitar, piano and drums, greeted them promptly with cheerful song:

*Some can do with a little bit more,  
But we can do with a little bit less . . .*



'This,' said Mannheim, opening the door wide, 'sounds a bit more like it. Signs of life at last.' He was smiling.

They found themselves at the back of a small auditorium in reflected glow from a brilliantly lit stage. Two blondes and two brunettes were dancing in procession around a phallic pillar as they sang. Each time the girls completed a circuit, they discarded another wisp of chiffon. They were about half-way through their striptease.

The instrumental trio were not visible. Maybe they were offstage, maybe only on tape. The silent audience scarce filled the front two short rows of seats. Mannheim went thumping down the wide aisle to them. Don, with an effort, took his gaze from the performers and followed.

*A little bit less, a little bit less . . .*

The dancing girls were loud with enthusiasm. Mannheim boomed above them and the thudding drums: 'Just a moment, please!'

They were neither offended nor put a whit out of their stride. They went on smiling winningly and singing and stripping.

Mannheim frowned, then mounted the few side-stairs to the stage, but only a few. For an invisible wall blocked him. He tapped it irritably here and there, then retreated.

'They're behind glass. A buck to a penny it's a recorded show. Spare your blushes, Don—they're not real. Not now, anyway.'

'But the audience is,' Don said loudly. And added: 'I think.'

For only small evidences distinguished them from waxwork figures. A woman raised a dilatory hand to mask a yawn. A man coughed. Another was polishing his horns as though preparing to catch every detail of the finale, but it seemed unlikely that he would: he was snail-slow, a loser in any race against time.

They were all in evening dress and far from immaculate. Most of the men needed a shave. Ties were awry, there were food stains on shirt fronts, the women's coiffures were dishevelled. Nobody looked bored but nobody looked interested. They merely looked blank.

Mannheim bawled at them, raising both arms. 'Remember me? Mannheim?'

The sole response was a languid wave from a spotty-faced younger man who seemed to be high on hash.

'Structuring the view. Go 'way.'

Mannheim looked along the double row of vacant, neglected faces. He shrugged and motioned to Don. 'For Pete's sake, let's get out. Ugh!'

A triumphant, gleeful chorus followed them up the aisle.

*And now we've nothing at all.*

Mannheim didn't turn his head, so Don didn't either.

Outside, Mannheim paused to shake his head, light a cigarette (Don refused one) and ask: 'Well, what did you think of that?'

'Not much—opium and burlesque don't mix. You knew those people?'

Mannheim nodded. 'More of the Crew. Andy wasn't there. I wonder if he's still alive—which is more than his Crew seems to be. What in hell's come over them? There were some nice people there, Don, believe it or not. And not a hop-head among them. Okay, we'll keep looking.'

They went along to the third door. This one opened upon a silence and a heart-shaped indoor swimming pool which appeared to be inlaid with gold. Don looked again and saw that it wasn't—either the water had been coloured yellow or it wasn't water.

Beside the pool was a group of black marble-topped circular tables with legs of ornamental brass. A stout man with hair whiter than his trousers sat alone at one scratching himself through a once lurid Bermuda shirt. He had his back towards them, watching the approach of what looked like a self-propelled refrigerator on wheels. It drew up beside him. A panel rolled up. The illuminated interior displayed shelves of steaming dishes. The man seemed indifferent or undecided. He made no move. A silvery bell chimed a gentle reminder or notice of closure. The man put out a hesitant hand, took a dish. The panel shut itself, the robot waiter rolled away, disappeared along a narrow passage.

Mannheim commented: 'Efficient service but scarcely personal. I'd prefer Jules at the Ritz any day.'

They walked up to the table. The man wasn't interested in them, nor in the dish of hot plum pudding, nor even in scratching himself any more.

'Andy!' exclaimed Mannheim.

Andrew Simon, who had been staring dully into space, now stared dully at both men. He said haltingly: 'Christmas? Is it Christmas? This pudding . . .'

He left the sentence trailing.

Mannheim was concerned. 'Andy,' he said, quietly, 'We've come to take you home.'

'Home?' The opaque eyes became just a little rounder. 'But I am home . . . aren't I? Yes, of course. Gentlemen, would you care for a glass of wine? Do help yourselves. Chateau . . . Chateau . . . I forget.'

He flapped a limp hand at the pool.

'Oh, my God.' For once, Mannheim was really disturbed and showed it. Andrew Simon was a cherished friend.

Don knelt, dipped a finger in the palely golden pool, sucked it. And again, to confirm. 'Manny—it's champagne! Sweet but flat as hell. How are we ever going to make any sense of all this?'

Mannheim shrugged and said in a whisper: 'That can wait. The immediate problem is to get them all out of here.'

Don dried his finger with his handkerchief. 'That's a tough one, considering the shape they're in. Do we have to carry them?'

Andrew Simon frowned at his pudding and prodded it with a fork.

'Christmas already,' he muttered. 'Well, what do you know?'

Mannheim bent over him. 'Andy, do you know me?'

'Er . . . I think . . . Are you Manny?'

'That's right, you've got it.' Mannheim looked relieved. 'Now look, it's time—'

'Merry Christmas to you, Manny.'

'And to you, Andy. But it's time you came home, you know. My plane's outside—what say we fly together? Come on, Andy, let's go.'

Andy waved vaguely. Possibly waving the suggestion aside. Possibly waving goodbye.

'You run along, then,' he said.

'Yes, but you come with us.'

'No. I don't want to.'

Mannheim's impetuosity got the better of his patience. He grasped Andy under the armpits. 'Take his feet,' he directed Don. As Don reached for them, Andy suddenly leaped to them, broke free and sprinted around the pool. He stopped on the far side, looking at them as though across a defensive moat. His expression was still of senile foolishness, uncomprehending yet suspicious.

Mannheim had been taken aback by the unexpectedness of it. He pulled himself together and started after him. Instantly, Andy darted for the door. This time, it was Don who went after him.

Mannheim called: 'Never mind—let him go.'

Don slowed, stopped, watched Andy fling open the big cream door and exist as though running for his life. Mannheim came along to the sharp tip of the pool.

'We'll catch up with him. There's nowhere much he can go.'

Don wiped his forehead. 'I've a hunch there's nowhere much any of us can go. This place smells of cheese, like a king-size mousetrap. What's happened to those poor devils in here?'

'Heaven only knows. Exposure to some harmful radiation, maybe. Could that cause premature senile decay, a hardening of the arteries of the brain? And yet . . . Andy can still sprint like a racehorse—you saw him. He won an Olympic Silver once, you know. He's only forty now.'

'Only forty? He looks more like seventy.'

'Yes. It's heart-breaking. His hair's gone white—it was only flecked with grey when I last saw him, last month. And obviously his mind's gone. Yet he was one of the wittiest people I've ever met. This place is more than just a trap, Don—it's a death-house. We'd better get back to the plane and hold a council of war.'

Don glanced at his watch and started. 'Lord, I'd forgotten that time limit. We'll have to rush or we'll be marooned here.'

They went at a brisk trot to the door and across the landing. From the staircase, as they descended it, they saw Andrew Simon wandering around the otherwise deserted entrance hall. He was muttering and looked lost. Then he noticed them and came to meet them. There was no recognition in his eyes.

'Excuse me, gentlemen, but where's the way out? I'm sure that I . . . I'm always looking for it . . . can't seem to remember . . .'

Mannheim smiled and took his arm.

'It's this way, old friend.'

He began to lead Andy to the strange doorway through which they had entered. Don, following, reflected that it was probably Andy's shadow they had glimpsed from the other side.

Then he stopped in his tracks, for the translucent screen before them was split and disturbed as a figure broke through it.

It was Greta, breathing hard, here blue eyes shining with mischief and excitement.

'Hello there. Having fun? Say, where is this—La Scala?'

'Well, I'll be damned.' Mannheim scowled at her. 'Didn't I tell you—'

Another figure burst through after Greta. It was the Hon. John Driscoll, looking uncharacteristically ruffled. He had been running and was flushed, breathless, and annoyed. On top of which he had to control his surprise at the décor in the light of the glittering chandeliers.

His gaze came reluctantly around to Mannheim.

He gasped: 'Sorry, Manny. She got away. You should have let me keep my gun.'

Mannheim froze him with a glance but addressed Greta: 'Explain this, girl.'

But she was regarding Andy, who was staring at her with the first indication of interest they had seen him display.

'Aren't you . . . Didn't we . . . Seem to have met . . .' he faltered.

Then she recognized him and became puzzled but solicitous. She took both his hands in hers. 'Andy, dear man, how are you? Yes, I'm Greta. We've been looking for you.'

'Greta . . . Yes, of course. You know, I keep getting so confused. Please help me, Greta. They want to put me away in a home. And I'm all right, I'm quite all right. It's just . . . I keep forgetting where I am. Don't let them take me. This is where I live. It's very nice. Let me show you around.'

'I'd like that, Andy.'

Greta quietly took his arm, disengaging her father's. Mannheim stepped back, undecided. Arm in arm, Greta and Andy proceeded up the grand staircase. The three men, now left out of it, looked at each other. Mannheim was still uncertain, Driscoll uneasy, and Don amused. He was thinking that if Greta were a child, then she was a child who knew how to get her own way, as autocratic as her father.

Driscoll said apologetically: 'Time was nearly up and you hadn't returned. I was getting a little edgy. Greta said we could all go, if we liked, but she had a feeling she was missing something. She jumped out. I tried to stop her—'

'All right, skip it,' said Mannheim, testily. 'She's a problem but we've a more pressing one on our hands here. See those three doors up there . . .?'

He described what lay behind them.

'The Crew's in a real bad way. We've got to get them out of there. We've room enough for all of them in the

plane but I can see we'll have plenty of trouble herding them there.'

'Suppose I fetch the rest of the Set,' Driscoll suggested. 'Then if each of us assumes charge of just one person, even carries him, if it comes to that—'

Greta hailed them suddenly from the landing. 'Hi, boys. Free drinks going up here.' She held a brandy goblet, drained it, and vanished back through the centre door.

Mannheim frowned. 'What the hell is she up to? Yes, okay, Hon—fetch the others.'

He went racing up the stairs.

Don sighed. 'Crazy people, crazy world! Am I coming or going? I keep asking myself.'

'It's always been like that in the Set, old man. They don't give you a chance to settle into a rut. Well, I'm going, myself—but I'll be back with some more crazy people. See you.'

Driscoll shouldered his way out through the door. Don, feeling that his grip on events had slipped and he was little more than a straw being blown around by them, climbed back up the stairs rather wearily. In the central room he found Mannheim shaking hands with some Crew members clustered around a drinks trolley. These were the men he had seen asleep. They were all awake and on their feet now, and some were even smiling, but the smiles were touched with vague sadness.

'You'll be welcome, Heinie,' Mannheim was saying, reaching for a gin bottle with his free hand.

Greta was at the side window with Andy Simon, looking at the seascape. She turned, saw Don and beckoned him. He started towards her. She snapped her fingers and the drinks trolley obediently left the group and rolled past Don to her. It was another robot.

'Good dog,' she said, patting it, and poured Don a whisky. 'Another, Andy?'

Andy shook his head. 'No, thanks, dear, I'm saving myself for the party.'

It was the first coherent answer Don had heard him make. Greta, he thought, could charm a response from an Egyptian mummy.

'Party? What party?' he inquired.

'Why, our Christmas party, of course,' Greta laughed. 'Come on, Andy, let's round up the rest of the Crew.'

Still talking gaily to him, she led Andy away, out of the room. Don finished his drink, thoughtfully watching Mannheim having rather less success in trying to jolly along his companions. The strain was becoming visible. Presently, Mannheim detached himself and came across to Don.

'Tough going—I need a break,' he said, *sotto voce*. 'They're still not really with it. Without Greta we'd have never broken through even this much. I guess we should have had to wheel them away.'

'What did Greta do?'

Mannheim smiled, with some pride. 'My girl knows how to go about handling people. An inherited instinct, maybe. She went straight to the key man, Andy. She didn't make our mistake of trying to coax him. She just

chattered on about the wonderful party we—the Set—were going to throw back in San Remo. That filtered through and hooked him. Andy's got this quaint fixed idea that it's Christmas, so he assumed it was to be a Christmas party. He asked if he could come. Greta said of course—and bring the Crew. So now she's got him working for her on that—they'll listen to Andy. Any excuse will do so long as we can get them clear of here. If only we can get them back into our own dimension, they may recover their wits, if not their looks.'

Don seized on the word. 'You think we're in another dimension? So do I. We came through a sort of door in space-time—'

'Yeah—a trapdoor,' said Mannheim laconically. '*But who left it open?*'

He lit a cigar. He said, around it: 'This place, wherever it is, puts years on you—literally. Look how those poor devils have aged in only nine days. We'll have to get out fast before we start losing our teeth.'

He noticed Guido Mazzini staring dubiously in their direction. He gave him a friendly wave, which was not returned. Instead, Mazzini snapped his fingers—a feeble but sufficient effort: the drinks trolley wheeled itself across to him.

The big door opened and Greta and Andy returned with the small crowd they had collected from the theatre next door.

'The gang's all here!' Greta cried, and the trolley began whirling this way, then that, serving the new customers. Greta smiled at them indulgently and came over.

'This really is the lot of them, Dad—I've counted heads. There's a huge dormitory on the floor above this, but it's empty—I took a look.'

'Good work. So carry on with it—get them moving out, for Pete's sake.'

Greta announced loudly: 'Everybody listen, please. Just give yourself one fast drink—then we're off to the party.'

There was an answering murmur, almost affable. The Crew downed their last drinks and the exodus began, down the stairs. But when they reached the narrow door, they jibbed at its strange screen. Apparently, they had no memory of negotiating it before. They became confused old men again, hesitating, backing away like sheep refusing to enter a pen.

Greta laughed at them.

'Look, there's nothing to it!'

She demonstrated a couple of times how easy it was to pass through the flimsy curtain. Just as she was succeeding in allaying their fears, Driscoll charged through from outside, followed by the rest of the Set. There was immediate chaos. The entrance hall was full of colliding people. Greta was jostled away to one side. She was disgusted.

'Oh, the hell with it! Dad, you take over.'

Mannheim, losing patience, roared and shoved at everyone until he'd formed them into a rough line. They began filing through to the outside world. Don had been

appointed rearguard. Bellita lingered with him.

When all had gone but them, Bellita paused for a final look at the hall.

'Looks classy, doesn't it, Don? How come a place like this got built in the middle of a desert? Why wouldn't Manny let us have a look around it?'

'He'll tell you later. Don't—'

'Oh!' Bellita clapped a hand to her cheek. Her eyes were round with shock.

'Bellita—what's wrong?'

She rubbed her cheek, then clung to Don, seeking protection.

'Something awfully cold touched my face. Like an icicle. No—colder, and soft. Ugh! Get me out of here, Don.'

He held her for a moment, looking searchingly around. They were quite alone. There was no sound but the splash of the fountain, the mirrors reflected no moving images, the floor bore nothing but its own bright mosaic patterns.

'It was just a cold draught, I expect,' he said. 'Let's go.'

He guided her gently ahead, into the screen. Just as it was about to close behind him, he heard a faint sound, like fairy laughter. It wasn't malicious but neither was it kindly. It was shrill, almost a titter, yet there was a musical quality to it. It seemed to come from somewhere high up on the grand staircase but it had no association with anything as warm as crimson carpet—or humanity. It was like a snatch of electronic music sounding from some faraway ice-cave. But it was an alien tongue expressing amusement . . . of some kind.

If Bellita heard it, she didn't comment, so neither did Don. They emerged silently into the sunlit desert scene, itself cold and unhuman, with its acrid aroma, and followed the straggling crowd to the comfortingly familiar presence of Mannheim's Bluebird.

It was only then that Don became aware of the fear that had been slowly mounting up within him. Mannheim had said it: that incredible building was some kind of death-house. It was a great relief to be leaving it.

He hoped they would make it back to the Riviera. He promised himself that when they did he would take Greta to some cheerful, bustling restaurant, with friendly waiters (not robots) and lively table companions (not the depressing, pitiful Crew).

Fortunately or unfortunately, he was ignorant of the reason for that alien laughter. But he was on his way to learn it.

With a full load now, Mannheim's plane took off and headed back the way it had come, taking a beeline over the sea.

Each member of the Crew had a custodian from the Set sitting beside him and trying to spark his interest and draw him out. Nevertheless, communication continued to be erratic. Sometimes there were flashes of animation, sometimes a joke would be rewarded by a smile, sometimes there were even intelligent exchanges.

But they seldom lasted long. Attention would wander and the afflicted would sink into apathy, melancholy or sleep.

Andy Simon remained the liveliest, possibly because Greta was his custodian still. But the others, on the whole, tended to remind Don uncomfortably of a geriatric ward. It was as though they believed that for them real life was over, and that although there might be occasional treats—like the supposed Christmas party—there was little to get excited about any more.

His own charge, Heinie, was now snoring. Don was chagrined. He had tried hard to be amusing and stimulating. He had thought that Heinie was nodding agreement, even maybe appreciation. Instead, he was merely nodding himself off to sleep. Don left him to it and went along to the pilot's cabin.

Mannheim was in the navigator's seat but not navigating. That was impossible: the dial needles of the instruments were swinging meaninglessly.

'Jim's flying by the sun,' Mannheim said.

'What sun?' Don asked.

Mannheim shrugged. 'It could, I suppose, still be our sun. It looks like it.'

'Seen from another dimension?'

'Why not?'

'I don't know,' said Don, ineptly.

'Very well, let's stick to what we do know—that there exists a way into this world. Therefore it follows that there's a way out—probably one and the same. All we've got to do is locate it again. But as it's not visible, the only way of finding it is to go through it.'

'Suppose it closed up behind us?'

'Suppose it did nothing of the kind,' Mannheim said impatiently. 'We know it remained open for at least nine days, so it's not very likely that it would have closed with the last couple of hours. If in fact it ever closes. It could account for the disappearance of quite a few planes that were lost without trace. The thing seems to drift about. It had moved a long way from San Remo after it engulfed the Crew.'

In his matter of fact way, Jim announced: 'Land ahead.'

Mannheim peered. 'France or Italy?'

'I don't see the Alps,' said Jim. 'And come to think of it, there's something else we haven't seen—a ship. Not one.'

Don scrutinised the nearing coast. 'It looks pretty much like the country we left back there.'

Mannheim looked hard again, and became grim and silent.

They passed high above the shore and onward across the hinterland of desert.

Don's spirits sank. 'Yes, damn it, we're back again.'

The white cube had become visible in the distance, with the bright splinter of the Crew's abandoned plane lying near it.

Jim said: 'We can't even trust the sun. We've just flown around in a big circle. We can't afford to do that sort of thing—the gas won't last for ever.'

'All right,' said Mannheim. 'Fly straight on, past that blasted thing. Let's see where we get to.'

The desert beyond the blockhouse proved to be monotonous in its sameness and seemed interminable. There was no sign that any living creature had passed that way before them.

At length, Jim said: 'Mr. Mannheim, we're nearing the point of no return. You must decide. If we turn back now we can make the blockhouse, where there's food and water, whatever else. If we go on but fail to reach the far side of the desert before the gas gives out, we'll probably die of thirst down there. We didn't stock up for a long trip, you know, and with all this crowd aboard rations will be short—very short.'

Mannheim considered only for a moment. 'Go on, Jim,' he said quietly. 'I'm not in the habit of turning back. Just remember what we'd go back to—slow death in life. That's the main item on the menu at the blockhouse—don't kid yourself. Don, what do you think? Not that you'll change my mind.'

'I back your gamble, Manny. That blockhouse scares me. It's . . . well, haunted—there's no other word for it. And not, I feel, by any friendly presence, either.'

Both Mannheim and Jim looked at him. 'What?' asked Mannheim.

Don told them about his and Bellita's queer experience. He added: 'I think I persuaded her it was only imagination. But I didn't persuade myself. You should have heard that creepy laugh.'

'Maybe we shall,' said Jim quietly. 'Look dead ahead—there's the blockhouse again. It can't be, but it is. We're just going around in circles—the way the Crew did, I'll bet, until they were forced down at last.'

They all stared at the white block distinct on the unnotched horizon. It was as if it were silently waiting for them, as inevitable as the tomb—a white marble tomb.

And all roads of sky, sea and land led to it. It was the centre of a vortex of electromagnetic forces. They were no longer free men. They were no more than particles trapped in a magnetic field—not even Mannheim the powerful, the wilful, the leader and despot. Neither his name nor his money could buy him out of this corner of the universe.

It was then that Don realized that whoever—or whatever—had laughed down there was well aware of that.

Mannheim kept Jim at it, ranging the empty air above the empty desert, hoping against hope that they might by chance nose through some unseen egress. He fought to the last drop of fuel.

But now the Bluebird was grounded with empty tanks—just like the Crew's plane but a stone's throw away.

Mannheim had to face his Set and admit that he'd led them into a trap. He stood, back to the cabin door, looking at them down the length of the plane. The moment he had announced an imminent forced landing, and that the party would have to be postponed, was the moment they began to lose their struggle for the ailing

souls of the Crew.

That blow dazed Andy Simon. He turned to Greta with a hurt look. 'But he can't . . . you can't . . . postpone Christmas. It wouldn't . . . wouldn't . . . would it? . . . Wouldn't be a Christmas party. I'm so . . . disappointed.'

His morale sagged. Because his Crew looked up to him, they were infected. Hope disintegrated. They were on their way back to the twilight zone, brooding, sombre, withdrawn.

So Mannheim addressed only his Set.

'If we don't take the Crew back into the blockhouse, they'll die on our hands. The temperature outside is barely above freezing point. Soon it'll be the same in here—the fuel's gone and we can't recharge. We're short of vitals: we're in poor shape to stand a siege. Still, after returning the Crew, we could try to hold out in here, waiting to be saved by some miracle.'

'But let's be realistic. Who could rescue us? Who knows where we are? We don't even know ourselves. And any outsider who may come would be snared as surely as we were. No, friends, we must go over to the attack. We'll march in there and root out the secrets of that place, even if we have to tear it apart. We'll uncover the intelligence behind it. We shan't give it a chance to get to work on us as it did with our poor friends. We'll get to work on it. There lies the only hope of getting through to our own world again. We must start now, while we've still got some fight in us. If we vacillate, it won't be long before we're just sitting around shivering and eking out the food, weakening and losing heart. Any objections, questions or comments?'

Bellita laughed nervously. 'I think the women should be protected. How about assigning us each a personal bodyguard?'

She looked covertly at Don.

Mannheim studied her face. 'Are you serious or joking?'

'It's no joke, Manny. I mean it.'

Jim stepped forward. 'I'll take care of you, Bellita.'

She accepted the offer, smiling at him. Jim was a practical man—perhaps a better bet, at that, she thought, than an eternally scribbling journalist, however handsome. Also it confirmed a suspicion that this usually undemonstrative pilot was interested in her.

Mannheim made no comment about it, and the only comments the others made were in support of his plan. The evacuation of the plane began. Bellita left clinging to Jim's arm. He was carrying an instrument resembling a large pistol he'd taken from the tool chest.

'A bodyguard should be armed,' he told her, and she giggled.

Shepherded into the blockhouse, the Crew sank rapidly back to their former vegetable existence, like water seeking the lowest level. Mannheim wrote them off—not without a wrench over Andy—as beyond redemption. Attention should now be concentrated, he said, on avoiding their fate.

He directed a systematic exploration of the place. The Set divided up into groups of three or four, and took different directions. Mannheim, Greta and Don formed a natural group and Don was surprised when Mannheim conscripted Bellita into it. With her, perforce, came Jim, but he was a bonus, a useful addition.

'You mentioned visiting the Crew's sleeping quarters, Greta,' said Mannheim. 'Don and I didn't notice any. I should like to see them.'

'I expect you missed the stairs, Dad. And I expect that's because there aren't any—you go by elevator.'

The elevator took them to the entrance of a long dormitory. The beds which lined it in neat rows had white-enamelled iron frames and identical plain yellow coverlets. Each was provided with a bedside cabinet. The floor was polished parquet. The windows on both sides looked out on parkland, dotted with pines, rolling away under a cloudless sky to wooded hills. It could have been somewhere in Surrey.

As they walked in, Bellita said: 'Reminds you of a hospital ward, doesn't it?'

'That's right,' said Jim. 'I once spent three months in a place like this. But then, all hospitals look pretty much alike.'

Don thought privately: we'll all end our days in these beds if we can't find the way out.

'What's through that door, Greta?' Mannheim asked.

Greta looked at the door at the far end. 'I don't remember seeing that door before. I'm sure the dormitory ended in a blank wall.'

'H'm.' Mannheim walked on and threw the door open. 'Good lord!'

They crowded in after him. It was a lofty bedroom opulently furnished in Italian Renaissance style. Sunlight reflected from water rippled across the painted ceiling. The tall window framed a vista of sunlit domes, one of which was unmistakably that of the Church of the Salute.

They went over and looked out on the Grand Canal of Venice, with its gliding gondolas and speeding, wake-forming motor launches, its hitching posts like barbers' poles, and the balconies, landing steps and ornate facades of the flanking *palazzi*. There was a distant glimpse of the Rialto.

'It all looks so real!' Bellita exclaimed.

Greta glanced at her. 'It is real. You remember this room, Bellita?'

Bellita gazed around it. 'No. How could I? I've never been here before.'

'Not with . . . someone else?'

Bellita was genuinely puzzled. She frowned, then shook her head helplessly.

'I remember it very well,' said Greta. 'You showed me it. It's Arnoldo's guestroom at the Casa Armetti. You stayed here. Remember now?'

Bellita's expression showed that she didn't. Jim's expression showed that he did and wasn't happy to. Bellita had had an *affaire* with the Conte Arnoldo

Armetti which neither Jim nor the Contessa had approved of. Jim hadn't expressed disapproval at the time, of course. He was only the hired pilot. Bellita was a millionairess who didn't realise that the pilot was in love with her.

Greta caught her father's eye. He shook his head slightly, intimating that the matter be dropped.

'Okay,' said Greta, carelessly. 'It doesn't matter.'

'No,' said Jim, curtly. 'It doesn't matter. Would anyone object if I demonstrated that?'

Mannheim raised an eyebrow. 'I don't suppose so, Jim. Go ahead.'

Jim lifted a heavy bronze statuette of a Roman warrior from its black marble pedestal, swung it twice, then let it fly straight at the window. It smashed a many-sided hole in the glass and vanished into the darkness beyond. For the sunny Venetian scene was suddenly blacked out. Out there it was darker than interstellar space because there were no stars, no single gleam of light.

Cold air, bearing a bittersweet scent, began pouring in through the hole.

Then the darkness came pouring in, too, like a black cloud. The window area became foggy and insubstantial. That whole wall was dissolving away in a dark mist. The solid furniture, the canopied bed, the room itself began to blur into shadow, the tessellated floor seemed to be melting beneath their feet.

And the cold became intense.

'Out!' shouted Mannheim. 'All get out!'

They scrambled back into the dormitory, still unchanged in its soft English sunlight. Bellita flung herself on a bed, clasping her head between her hands as though she had been struck. She moaned quietly. Jim knelt and held her. The others paused uncertainly. Don, apprehensively, looked back over his shoulder.

Then he exclaimed, astonished. 'Look—the door—!'

They looked. There wasn't a door any more—only a perfectly blank wall.

'So it wasn't real, after all,' said Greta, breaking the startled silence.

'No, it wasn't real,' said Jim, from the bedside. 'So it doesn't matter, you see.'

Bellita was crying quietly now, face-downward, her head buried in her arms. Jim kissed the nape of her neck gently.

Bellita had gone to sleep on the bed and Jim stayed with her.

'She was right, you know,' he said. 'No woman should be alone in this crazy place.'

The other three continued their tour, compared notes with other groups and kept an eye on the now scattered Crew. They looked in at the theatre where the same inane burlesque show was keeping its feeble grip on its equally inane audience. Don half seriously suggested throwing something at the glassed-in stage. 'That show deserves breaking up,' he said.

'Possibly,' said Mannheim. 'But then cold black

reality would pour in on those poor devils. It would kill them. So let them be.'

They had been told about the completely automatic kitchen and went along to see it. It was a busy maze of handling devices, humming conveyor belts, thermostatically-controlled ovens, self-replenishing refrigerators . . . Robot waiters wheeled to and fro from the dining hall where semi-comatose Crew members lounged and gave confused orders and wasted food prodigally.

And it was good food.

Greta tasted the roast pheasant. '*Cordon Bleu* cooking,' she pronounced. 'Try some.'

Don shook his head. 'I've no appetite. I'm more interested in discovering where all this food comes from.'

'From that great big larder, of course.'

'Oh, do be sensible,' he said, impatiently. 'How is the larder restocked? So far as I could understand from Andy—and, my God, it's difficult to get any sense out of him now—there have never been any outside deliveries to the blockhouse. Yet the larder is never empty.'

'So why worry? It's a cornucopia. I've always wanted one.'

'You've always had one, Greta. You've never had to worry. None of this is really new to you—you and your crowd. It's just a continuation of the *dolce far niente* life you've always had. Before long, if you're not careful, you'll be accepting life in the blockhouse as normal. Then you'll be on your way to becoming as flabby and mindless as the Crew. Like so many battery hens.'

'Laying eggs—just like you do?' Greta smiled.

Her natural good humour dissolved his irritation.

'Sorry, darling. This place is getting on my nerves, I guess. I find it depressing.'

'It's dead,' she said, unexpectedly. 'Like a fair-ground on a wet night when no one's around. The carousels whirl, the music plays, the lights shine—but it doesn't mean a thing. It's all so mechanical. The gaiety is phoney. There's no spirit you can enter into. Frankly, Don, it's beginning to get me down too . . . Good heavens, there's a man hiding behind that cooker!'

It was Mannheim, who straightened up, automatically dusting the knees of his trousers although the floor was hygienically clean.

'It's only Dad,' he said, 'crawling around tracing the power cables. They go down under the floor—to where? An underground main cable? A battery? A generator? You ask where the food comes from, Don. I ask where the power comes from to run this whole set-up. Find the source and we may get somewhere.'

'Like where?' asked Don.

'From our circular tours in the sky it seemed obvious that the whole space-warp—to call it that—centres on this blockhouse. It's like the eye of a whirlpool. But it's an artificial whirlpool, space-warp, force-knot—or whatever. Electro-magnetic fields have been twisted out of true and held that way by even greater force. I suspect that that greater power is generated from here or hereabouts. If we can locate that generator and put it out of

action, the artificial field would collapse—'

'And drop us splash in the middle of the sea,' said Greta.

'It might. Again, it might not. But we've got to do something pretty drastic, my girl.'

Greta spat on her palms and rubbed them together.

'Right. Let's take the floor up.'

Mannheim regarded her, stroking his chin. 'I would like you to go and see how Bellita's making out, Greta. Maybe she's awake now. If she is, ask her if she remembers now staying at the Casa Armetti. Has it come back to her?'

'Beats me how she ever forgot it,' said Greta. 'She was crazy about that man. She once told me that the time she spent with him were the happiest days of her life.'

She went off, whistling. Still thoughtful, Mannheim watched her go.

'Don,' he said, 'do you know Bellita very well?'

'Not really. She's all right but a bit—well, flighty.'

'True. But that's only on the surface. If she were as shallow as that, I would never have admitted her to the Set. Underneath, she's pure guts. I could tell you things . . . never mind. Take it from me, she's naturally tough and independent. And she has pride. She would never admit to being afraid, even if she were. And then, that time, she stepped right out of character. Asked for a bodyguard—shamelessly! That's not the Bellita I knew. No, Don, the rot's set in already—and it started with her. She's lost some of her old spirit.'

Don nodded. 'It began when she felt the presence of that thing.'

'I can feel it too. It's insidious. I can't help wondering about Greta. I heard her tell you that this place is beginning to get her down. Greta, of all people! It takes a major calamity to get her down.'

'God, Manny, what are we up against here?'

'Something more than a little mad, I fancy. Take, for instance, that swimming pool full of stale champagne—it could only be the conception of an idiot. Or—'

Mannheim broke off and clapped his hand to his forehead.

'Lord, I'm the idiot! Why didn't I see that? I remember now. It was Andy's dream.'

'What do you mean?'

'Andy's favourite drink was always champagne, especially the vintage from Epernay. He really loved the stuff. His dream was to go swimming in it—he often said so. I presumed he was joking. Joke or not, he got his chance to make the dream come true.'

Don stared at him. 'Are you trying to tell me we're stuck at the bottom of a wishing well or something?'

'Or something. But their dreams coming true doesn't seem to be making anyone happy. Maybe Andy did swim in champagne when it was fresh and sparkling—but there's no sparkle left either in it or him now. As for Bellita: maybe she wished to relive those days at the Casa but when the Casa came back into her life she didn't recognize it. Make something of that, Don?'

'Not a damn thing. Can you?'

'I can make a guess. When folk start to crumble in this joint, their memory's the first thing to go. So if you notice you're beginning to forget things, Don—watch out. You're being worked on. We must warn everybody about this. It's time for a conference, anyway. We need to correlate impressions and try to build up a general picture of this place. Then have a brainstorming session on ways of beating it. I want the Set to assemble down in the lobby—the entrance hall. Pass the word around. You take the upper floor, I'll take this. Tell Greta to see me downstairs.'

'Right, Manny.'

Don made for the lift. Greta, or someone, had left it at the floor above. He pressed the button that brought it down. He stepped in and the solid door closed behind him.

Immediately, something dabbed against his wrist like an ice-cold compress. He grabbed and caught it, securing the grip with his other hand. It was serpentine, writhing strongly in his grasp, but totally invisible. It was like an animated steel spring wrapped in thick velvet and as cold as though it had been dipped in liquid air.

It froze his fingers but he held on. He was determined not to let it escape.

It cracked like a whip, flinging him back against the elevator wall and pulling scorchingly away from his fingers. He groaned with pain and anger. He crossed his arms, tucking his agonized hands under his armpits.

'All right.' His teeth were clenched, so it was a mumble. 'All right. But I'll get you, just the same.'

During the struggle, the lift had carried him to the next floor but the door remained shut, awaiting his signal to open. So the thing was boxed in with him, although he couldn't see it. But the lift was small. If he stood in the middle he could reach out and touch any wall.

His ski jacket hung loosely open, gloves bunched in the pockets. He removed it and donned the gloves. Then he whirled the jacket around him, striking out in all directions. In that small space he must hit the thing and so locate it.

He became breathless and dizzy, beating empty air—he must have accounted for every cubic inch of the interior.

He contacted nothing. The thing was gone. There was no crack it could have wriggled through, but it was gone.

He felt horribly confused. Was that shrill but faint laugh echoing in his memory or actually sounding now?

He let himself out, breathing hard. He went a few paces, then leaned against a wall to steady himself. In the past he had played squash with less exertion. I must be getting old, he thought—and was petrified by the implication. Please God, *no!* He held his head until it cleared a little.

He was in the dormitory. The painter—Brough—was the only other occupant, sprawled on his back on a bed contemplating his cigarette smoke. Don went unsteadily over to him.

'You're not supposed to be taking it easy, Brough. You were told to size up this place.'

Brough hardly shifted his gaze. He looked tired, not so much physically as spiritually. Tired, maybe, of pretending to himself and others that he was a neglected genius.

'I've sized it up,' he said, indifferently. 'It's a cage and I'm locked in it. I've been in one all my life. So what's new?'

Don saw that he would be of little help.

'Lying there feeling sorry for yourself won't change it. Look, Manny wants us to assemble down in the lobby now. We've discovered a thing or two. You'd better be in on it.'

'Okay.' Brough sighed and swung his feet to the floor. 'Where's Jim and Bellita? I thought they were here.'

'Greta came and took them to the Casino—next door.'

'Casino?' Don stared around the dormitory. The door had reappeared in the far wall. He started toward it.

'Not that way,' Brough called, moving sluggishly towards the main door. 'This way.'

Don hesitated. 'Be with you in a second.' He wanted to know whether Venice was back too. He went and opened the door cautiously.

It was still a bedroom, but not in a palace. It had come from suburbia of thirty years ago at least. The bed was three-quarter length, not an adult's. There was a model ship and toy cars on a chest of drawers, Picasso prints on the wall. A small easel stood beside a desk littered with watercolour paints in small china cells, brushes, pots, paper . . .

Intuitively, Don knew who the artist was: Brough, when a boy. This represented the days of hope, when the world was alive with colour and meaningful patterns, and to capture some of that on blank white paper was the purpose and promise of life. Disillusionment lay far away and unsuspected on the night side of that bright world.

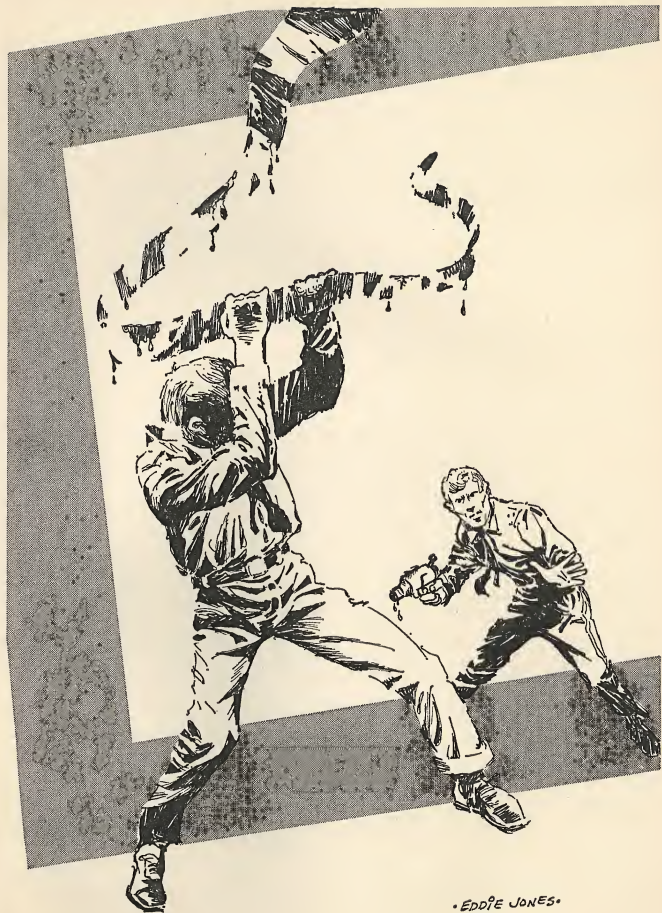
Don regretted his brusqueness. Judge not . . . He hurried back after Brough, overtook him on the landing outside.

'In there,' Brough jerked a thumb at a door which wasn't there the last time Don was here.

Beyond it Don discovered a huge room and most of the Set at gaming tables. He barely glanced at the room. It formed a fair—and maybe exact, for all he could recall—replica of part of the San Remo Casino. But he noted with a certain astonishment that the croupier at the roulette table was the twin of the one who had pushed a fortune in chips across to him. A robot facsimile? Or purely a hypnotic suggestion? Would Arnaldo Armetti have walked into that Venetian bedroom if they had waited instead of destroying the illusion?

Greta was casually pushing a pile of blue chips on to a roulette number, smiling an aside to Jim and Bellita. Several others, riding her luck, were waiting to place bets on the same number.





• EDDIE JONES •

Don pushed through to her. 'Greta, your father's waiting for you down in the hall. He wants us all down there right away.'

'He's a spoilsport. I've only just discovered this place. I called the clan in and we're having fun. Hurry, Don, put your shirt on Twenty-seven.'

'Oh, to hell with that.' He started to explain the situation but she wasn't really listening. Her attention was on the little ball beginning to hop around the spinning disc. He fell silent, studying her face. It was beautiful, as ever, but he detected, he thought, some slight changes. There were two scarcely visible frown marks between the eyebrows; and creases, thin as pencil lines, on her forehead. None of these disappeared when she smiled.

His gaze passed to Bellita, also intent on the wayward ball. Her red hair had always been glossy, as though just brushed. Now it was dull and untidy, suggestive of rusty wires. There were a few greying threads among them. She was not smiling.

He caught Jim watching him watching. Jim winked. He looked as calm and self-sufficient as ever. Don signalled that he wished to talk to him away from the table. They went to a quiet corner, and a shout went up: 'Twenty-seven wins!'

Don said: 'The girls are in real trouble now, Jim. We all are, come to that—'

'Bellita?' asked Jim sharply, concernedly.

'Yes. Greta, too. Listen.'

He told Jim about Mannheim's theories and suspicions, and of his own encounter with the thing in the lift.

'I don't know what it might have done to me. Do I look any different?'

Jim looked at him carefully. 'Not that I can see. Not yet, anyway.'

'But there's certainly been a change in Greta since I saw her only a short while ago. I wonder if that thing was in the lift when she came up?'

'Could be, but she didn't mention it,' said Jim. 'Lord, I wish I'd been with you. Two of us might have scotched the bloody thing. It makes me hopping mad just to think of it and what it's doing to us. I'm pretty fond of Bellita, you know.'

'Yes, I know. Even if we get a second chance, it'll be tough to nail it. Apart from being invisible, it seems able to de-materialize itself.'

'There's a way of making it visible,' Jim held up the aluminium paint sprayer. 'Why do you think I've been lugging this around? Remember when you told Manny and me that whatever touched Bellita was invisible? That's when I got this idea. As for the de-materializing bit, there's only one way to stop that—if we ever get our hands on it. Kill it. Quick. Before it has a chance to pull out.'

'Kill it? But we don't know what it is—it may not be possible to kill it.'

Jim's face set hard, his eyes were cold. 'We've come to the crunch, Don—it's kill or be killed. In effect, it has killed the Crew already. It's sucked the life out of them

—they're as good as dead. It's trying to do the same to us. We're fighting for our lives—we can't afford to be squeamish.'

'Yes, you're right, of course . . . While I remember it, Manny wants to know whether Bellita could remember anything about the Casa Armetti after she came round.'

Jim looked across at Bellita. She was still with the group but not of it—not quite. They were laughing and joking and she was smiling faintly but there was a withdrawn look in her eyes.

'If she did, it was too painful to dwell on,' he said. 'I mentioned it a couple of times. Each time, she held her head and complained that it hurt. Said it was like raw nerve-ends aching in her brain.'

Don felt the contagion of Jim's cold anger. He said abruptly: 'This has gone far enough. Let's break this party up and get them out of here.'

He turned. Jim caught his arm and whispered in his ear: 'First, we'll get that croupier. He may be only a ghost—or he may be that thing in another shape.'

Don nodded. They started purposefully back to the table.

There was a sudden outcry from the players.

'Where did he go?'

'Hey, did you see that? He just melted away.'

The croupier had vanished before their eyes.

Don and Jim exchanged significant glances. Words were unnecessary. Anyway, words were dangerous: even whispered ones could be overheard.

The sudden break up of the game left the party aimless. That helped.

'Everyone get into line at the elevator,' Don told them. 'Manny wants you all down on the ground floor in a hurry. So come along now.'

They began to file out with hardly a murmur. Jim took charge at the elevator and began sending them down, four at a time.

Don waited till last, with Greta. She told him: 'Bellita's suffering from amnesia—at least, so far as the Casa's concerned.'

'Jim told me.' He was uneasily aware of the traces of strain in her face. However, she seemed to have lost little of her old inconsequential manner.

'Did you see how that croupier skipped? He was scared that my next bet would break the bank.'

'I expect he remembered how close we came to doing that to him the last time.' He was humouring her.

Her frown came too easily. 'The last time?'

'Don't you remember him—the croupier at San Remo? When we made a killing with our new system?'

The frown stayed, and Don became afraid of what could be the reason for it. He produced his notebook. 'Look, I wrote it up—the fifteenth. We had a great day. See for yourself.'

She read it silently, then gave the book back silently. 'It's happened to me too, Don—just like Bellita. So that was the San Remo Casino? Gone from my memory but somehow projected back there?'

'That seems to be the way it happens, Greta,' he said, unhelpfully.

'But I don't feel any pain. Bellita did.'

'Maybe that's because no one interfered with the illusion. Jim smashed Bellita's—violently. There must have been repercussions which affected her.'

He thumbed through the more recent pages of his book. He began to find passages he never remembered writing—or experiencing. Greta doing her Pavlova act. He and Greta ski-ing blissfully in moonlit solitude in the Aosta Valley. He couldn't even picture those incidents. Probably those settings were pictured elsewhere now, mushroom replicas reachable through some new door in this house of illusions.

The lift came up empty for the last time. They entered it, arms wrapped around each other, symbolically clinging to their memories of each other . . . while they could. But if the mental vivisection continued at this rate . . .

A great sadness began to envelop Don. It was the encroaching fringe of that same shadow which had extinguished the glow and laughter of the Crew and left them not even knowing why they took their pleasures sadly.

Greta had always been the life of the party. But this was a strange hell where parties lost their life. He knew that he and Greta were already beginning to lose one another.

The Set were sitting in rows on the carpet of the sweeping staircase. Mannheim had their reports, of which Don's was the most startling and revealing. He had assessed them and, standing by the fountain, delivered his conclusions.

He said it appeared that they were captives of some unimaginable alien being, which was playing a cat and mouse game with them for its own peculiar amusement. It must be a creature of at least four dimensions, for it could manipulate things in their limited three-dimensional world without being observable. It was able to penetrate so-called solid matter by moving along another dimension.

'It doesn't actually materialize or de-materialize,' he said. 'It merely extrudes from or withdraws to this other dimension, at will. So we're at a great disadvantage. How can we hope to combat it? Again, its technological know-how is quite literally out of this world—or rather, our world. It employs forces we can't understand and handles power on a staggering scale.'

Greta called out: 'If it's so intelligent, why doesn't it behave like an intelligent being? It hasn't even tried to communicate with us—it treats us as though we were wood-lice.'

'One can be both intelligent and knowledgeable and yet still be emotionally retarded,' Mannheim answered.

'Lord knows we have our own strain of compulsive killers. Obviously this creature is emotionally primitive. It may even be, in its way, a bit scared of us, simply because it doesn't understand the way we behave . . . You look incredulous, Jim.'

'I think it knows what it's doing, all right, Manny. It's just damn perverted, that's all.'

'If it knew what it was doing,' said Mannheim, 'it would have made me, the leader, its first target. The first rule of tribal warfare is to disable the enemy chief. It's ignorant—or scared. It hasn't touched me. So it's left me free to plan a campaign—*Ah!* I thought that might rouse you—Jim, the gun!'

Mannheim was grappling with the unseen. His hands were like claws gripping nothing. His face began to flush with the effort.

Jim rocketed off the second stair, his spray-gun levelled. Don was only a pace behind him.

A controlled cloud of glistening particles enveloped Mannheim's hands, making gauntlets of them and revealing something like a silvery eel writhing between them. Don clamped his gloved grip on the thing.

Jim raised the angle of the spray. Most of it passed beyond to join the fountain's own spray, but the rest stuck and rendered visible a kind of agitated metal creeper seemingly hanging from the high ceiling.

The Set started to its feet.

'Come on, confound you—*grab!*' Mannheim roared.

They came in a rush. Don gasped a warning about gloves.

Driscoll, the tall, got a grip way up, heaved down. Greta joined on, then others. They were trying to drag the creature completely out of its hidden world. It was like a vertical tug of war.

Then a knife flashed—Jim's pocket-knife. He sawed at the thing. A black split appeared on its surface, in sharp contrast to the silver, and began to gape wider slowly.

There came a sound like a banshee howling far out in the night. It was the voice of the thing. There was no hint of music in it this time—only the dissonance of snapping nerve-wires and pain-wave-impulses flowing chaotically.

It cut off, as all sound and light and consciousness were cut off. Mannheim's Set were swallowed up in freezing darkness.

To Mannheim it seemed as though he were back in that silent temple at Buddhaya built on the spot where Buddha had received enlightenment under the Bo-tree.

To Driscoll it was as though he stood on that far-spreading deserted South Pacific shore watching the dawn.

Don was alone a mile deep in the Grand Canyon beside the waters of the Colorado River.

Greta was watching the Northern Lights from Goose Bay.

Bellita stood at the foot of a 2000-year-old redwood in the forest of giant trees in the Cowell Redwoods Estate Park.

Each member of the Set had at some time been aware of standing on what seemed to be holy ground, where the sense of their own identity slipped from them and they were at one with something greater than themselves.

Each now seemed to be standing in those same tracks

in that same mood, hearing a voice that spoke from waves and rocks and leaves and walls and icefields. The moments of high mysticism are few and cannot be long sustained. But the message which comes in those brief moments arrives in a great flash, which illumines whole landscapes of understanding.

The voice used few words but each spoke volumes. It didn't relate: it made a statement. The hearers' comprehension was equally absolute.

It was not of mankind, for mankind were creatures of another world. It was a parent. It was also a philosopher, an artist, a scientist—in short, a brain and spirit seeking knowledge about all things and all kinds of life in all known dimensions. It used an instrument for its work, which observed but neither harmed nor disturbed.

If it were not misused.

But it had been misused—by a child at play, in the absence of the parent.

The child was innocent. There was no evil in its world. It did not know evil. It was ignorant of many things.

It observed these groups of humans whose practical aims was happiness. It took specimens from their memory tracks of the happiest times of their lives, examined them and tried to live those experiences vicariously. And then it bungled its attempts to replace those memories intact. But they had been torn too roughly.

To try to undo the harm, it transferred these people from their world to an artificial one where, in time, they could relive their happiest experiences as often as they chose, and make their dreams come true, and enjoy a

round of continual pleasure—of their strange Earthly kind.

The child tried to share some of their happiness and laugh with them. But they ceased to be happy and attacked and hurt it.

Its own damage was repairable. The damage it had caused to these people's minds was not. The parent loved and understood. It believed these people would also love and understand . . . during these moments, if only then. For such moments of direct contact and communication were rare and for some may never come again.

It was too late to save the Crew. Their personalities had dissolved almost completely and merged into the force-field of the space warp. The space warp itself must now be dissolved in order to free the Set. Unfortunately, the lost memories would be lost forever with it. But much remained . . .

The Set were singing *Santa Lucia*. They were more than a little drunk. Maybe that was why their senses tended to swim and concentration was blurred.

However, they soon began to pull themselves together when the fun-promising town of Algiers hove into sight across the blue and glittering sea.

Jim, at the controls, said: 'Well, there it is.'

Mannheim, beside him, echoed: 'There it is.' And sighed. He looked up at Don, just behind him in the pilot's cabin. 'It didn't come off, Don. I'm afraid we shall never see the Crew again. May their souls rest in peace.'

'Amen,' said Don, quietly, then went back to join Greta, the centre of the merriment, the life of the party.



## DID YOU MISS THESE?

Were you unlucky enough to miss out on our previous issues? VISION OF TOMORROW, Number 1, contained top-line science fiction by Jack Wodhams, William F. Temple, Damien Broderick and others. Dan Morgan, John Rankine, and E. C. Tubb were featured in the second issue. Number 3 contained stories by Philip High, E. C. Tubb, Sydney J. Bounds, David Rome, and Kenneth Bulmer. The fourth issue featured great stories by E. C. Tubb, Philip E. High, Christopher Priest, and Jack Wodhams. 'The Impatient Dreamers,' Walter Gillings' fascinating history of British Science Fiction, was featured in each issue. Don't miss this opportunity—copies are still available at five shillings each, post free, from the editorial address.

# After Ragnarok

ROBERT  
BOWDEN

## At Ragnarok the gods died . . . fire spread and the world burned

The black longship crawled across the sea like a cockroach. The burnished sun was a drop of burning gold near the sill of the world.

The sea was a plane of red gold beneath the sun, the sharp keel of the ship cutting through it as a feathered arrow slices the air. The ship sent a spray of wavelets behind it.

The oarsmen strained at their benches, the salt spray slashing their backs. They scented home and like horses were eager. They had been long without women. Beneath the steersman's platform the mechanism of the gods, an old diesel engine, kept pace with the oarsmen.

At the prow stood a warrior. He was dressed in chain mail and furbreeks. A boarskin cloak was tossed across his large shoulders. The hair beneath his flat boar-tusked helm was blond. His face was scarred with radiation burns. Under the beard and the brown crust of scar it was the face of an eagle. He carried at his belt a broad leaf-bladed sword and strapped to his back a small round buckler.

He stared at the churn of the oars and at the dying sun. He then turned to search the horizon for a dark shore, across the calm, still water and the darkening sky.

The tiny ship in a great expanse of black water glided away from the drowning sun and toward the home-calling shore.

And as night fell the warrior watched a small star race across the sky.

The silver disk of the sun was obscured by a deep dawn mist when the ship pulled in close to shore.

As the ship edged slowly up the fiord some mariners caught fleeting glimpses of the land. It was shrouded with snow. There was a subdued murmur at the benches.

Winter had come earlier than they remembered.

The oars were racked up, the oarsmen idle. The diesel chugged slowly. The warrior at the prow strained to hear into the whiteness.

A voice came from the nervous crowd along the benches.

'Hey Ragnar, what does the silence tell you?'

'A rock to starboard. Edge over steersman.'

'How deep does it run?'

'Three times the length of a spear. It is safe yet.'

Silence settled again as Ragnar turned to listen to the echoes.

The cold and the silence stabbed in from the dark unknown. The grey clinging mist was sentient. It watched them.

The sailors shivered.

The cold was malevolent, and so was their fear.

'Cut the engine.'

Suddenly land loomed out of the darkness. Their ship slowed itself in crushing newly formed ice beneath its bows, and crashed into the sand with a slight jolt. The sailors leapt into the knee-deep biting water to haul the ship onto the beach. Then the villagers were swarming around them to help, placing rollers under the keel.

The ship shuddered onto the rollers and was dragged over and onto the dry soil. Its propellers were bright in the torchlight.

The chieftain was the proud owner of a weapon that the Gods had wrought before Ragnarok. It was a needle-gun, slim, bright and deadly, and when he was not polishing it, it hung on the wall of the Great Hall beside shields and a raven banner to be admired on smoky evenings and shown to passing strangers. At the edge of its silver pistol-grip there was precisely engraved a set of indecipherable runes:

*Made in Sweden 1985*

He also owned a dog-eared, yellowed and slightly singed copy of 'The First Book of Norse Mythology'.

Ragnar sat at the top of the Hall, on the right of the Chieftain Heimir. Meat that was not old and stringy in brine was a welcome change and the ale was strong and warm. A sense of pleasure flowed through him.

The smoke curled up to the darkness of the rafters but from there it seemed to seep throughout the whole hall.

The torchlight flickered across the faces below him. They were carved in red and black. Amongst them he could pick his comrades. Eric, the steersman, was asleep up at the end of the hall. A jug of mead was half spilt across his chest. Ottar Haroldson, the shaman and machine tender, was making love to a kitchen wench in the straw beneath the benches, to the great amusement of those around him.

Ragnar smiled faintly.

'Ah, friend Ragnar, tell us of your far travels.'

'Yes, tell us of your voyage.'

'Yes, tell us!'

Ragnar stood. A hush settled across the hall. The main feast was over and the guests settled down to drink mead and hear the saga of Ragnar Dragonsbane. They could hear the rattle of the wind against the parchment windows above the rafters.

And so Ragnar Dragonsbane told of the voyage across the Burning Ocean. He told of the endless days without sight of land, of hunger and of thirst.

He told of the burning island they encountered, that was surely the home of Surt himself, and of the island of glaciers and eternal frost.

Then they came along to a bleak and rocky coastline, a land of moss and lichen, and huge white bears. He told of the immense white creature that attacked a shore party and killed two warriors before they brought it down.

One of his warriors then stood and displayed its finely cured skin before them. There was a murmur of awe. The beast had obviously been large.

He told of the journey southward, of the huge elks they hunted to replenish their stores, and of how the landscape became more barren.

Then he told of immense seas of black glassy amber, of ruins that glowed faintly in the night, and of the flows of molten rock that had come like rivers to the sea and hardened there.

There was the place of pits and craters, the twisted corroded metal, the upright blackened spears that might have once been the buildings of the Gods, and the warrior who volunteered to go ashore. He had gone in one of the small dugout boats and walked across the drifts of char, broken glass and blackened bones. He came back very quickly and was dead the next day. They gave him a warrior's burial in the small dugout.

He then told of the place of deserts, of dust and sand and of weird foliage. Then further south yet, the land of jungle, of dragons and strange saurians. Ragnar himself had slain an immense green-scaled serpent and thus gained his nick-name.

He told of the wide river and of the school of small fish they had seen eat a pig alive, of giant spiders, and of plants that ate small birds. He told of swamp, mud and dirty green.

He then told of their return trek, of skirting a sea of sucking green weed, and of the immensity of the Ocean.

He told of the sheets of ebon streaked glass, the glowing ruins and the burning deserts further to the south of their own land-mass.

And when he had finished a silence settled over the Great Hall. Then there was a roar and a cheer so that the howl of the wind could no longer be heard. For the moment the encroaching frosts were to be forgotten.

'At Ragnarok the Gods died. Surt, the God of Fire, with his sword that blazed more brightly than the sun itself, spread fire over the earth and the world burned. The World-Serpent, Jormungand, from whose eyes and nostrils fire burnt, spat poison that spread out over the land and seas. It is said that the bane is still carried in the winds when they blow from the south. It causes the Changed Ones or so says the shaman.'

'Yes, then as say the old sagas of creation, out of the cinders rose the Sun, the sons of thunder, and Vidar, and Vali, who became the ancestors of the race of men, and corn grew wild.'

'But the ruins of the Aesir still remain. Surely that is what you saw in the south.'

'I do not know. However some say that a few of the Gods escaped across Bifrost. Certainly some of their works remain.'

'Yes. Did you know that some shamans call the rainbow bridge an orbit.'

'Yes but I know not from where the term came.'

'Still we men cannot follow the gods, and the ice comes closer each season.'

The wheel hung in space.

Behind it was the ebony backdrop of infinite space in flights of silver stars. The universe spun in all its glory like some vast clockwork mechanism. Stars burnt their eternal plasma fires. Tenuous clouds of starstuff swirled across the dark abyss.

Nova burst into transient incandescence and died into dark nebulae. Immense whirlpool galaxies spun across the darkness.

Behind the wheel there was night and an unknown.

Before the wheel there loomed a planet. It was a planet of scarred landscapes and ocean. Its icecaps were large and growing. The interglacial epoch was ending. Its plains were almost devoid of vegetation and certain areas on the nightside seemed to be covered with a vast vague phosphorescence.

The planet was Earth.

The wheel spun and frail men were thrown against its outer skin in a weird parody of gravity. The men observed the world below and like gods were concerned.

The ship was a stranded whale on the beach. The people clustered about it as scavengers. They scraped off the debris of the sea, caulked it with boiling pitch and polished its diesel fittings.

Ragnar stood gaunt against the skyline and directed the work.

The pitch was heated in a huge cauldron, ladled into workers' buckets and taken to the thirsty wood.

Ottar Haroldson inspected the engine carefully and then carved runes into a piece of wood to bring luck.

The days were short and the nights were long. The cold had come and at night so did the wolves. Thus it was only Ottar Haroldson who dared venture out one evening to take a young virgin to the smokehouse.

Later he stood at the door of the smokehouse and watched the sky. The girl lay asleep on the straw behind him.

As he watched a bright star raced across the sky. Then when the star reached zenith a smaller star broke away from it and arched across the sky.

And the smaller star grew larger and burnt brighter than the sun itself. It settled slowly behind the distant mountains on a pillar of flame.

The shaman gaped, muttered to himself and ran to the Great Hall. The girl lay forgotten behind him.

The ship entered the atmosphere at a tangent and skimmed across the outer layers like a stone across



FALFOQUINN

water. The night side of the planet flashed past beneath it. The drive opened with a braking burn. Inertia ripped at the ship's fabric. The ship withstood. The preliminary braking phase was ended. The drive blast was cut off. The ship went into free fall once again.

The ship hurtled toward the earth. The atmosphere howled around it, as the ship stabbed toward the ground.

The drive opened out again. A licking orange column of flame preceded the ship. The flash slit the night. Like neon it touched the darkness. The naked landscape was revealed below as the tongue of flame cushioned the ship.

A roar disturbed the silence. The landing struts of the ship opened out and spider-like it settled into the snow. Clouds of shrouding steam billowed and hissed until the ship touched the ground. Ice melted and streamed away from beneath it.

The feeble sun rose slowly from the sill of the world. Ragnar sat, a cloak wrapped around him against the cold, and carefully polished his dirk. Ottar, the shaman, stood beside him.

An excited group of warriors was gathering before them in the clearing. As the sun rose higher its cold light glinted on their spears. As it slowly dispelled the darkness the torches were extinguished. Snow covered the ground for as far as they could see. Gaunt stunted branches stood naked against the sky. A film of ice stretched across the fiord.

Ragnar stood. The light gleamed off his helm. He swung his birch-wood shield across his shoulder, his ashen spear across the other.

The men fell into a rough order. Ottar pointed toward the horizon. Ragnar barked a brief order, and turned toward the mountains. The warriors followed.

They were a motley group of fur cloaks, and horned helmets, swords and axes, but they were also a deadly co-ordinated fighting machine.

Eric, the steersman, was carrying a raven standard.

The needle ship stood stark against the horizon. The metal of the rocket-drive ticked as it cooled.

A furry thing scuttled away startled.

The lower fuel compartments of the ship were empty. They now stood ready to serve as a launch platform.

The snow slowly encroached on the charred area cleared beneath the rocket nozzles. As it did, hissing clouds of steam billowed up. The metal cooled further.

The sun climbed slowly until it was high in the southern sky.

The higher fuel compartments were full, hydrogen fuel and fluorine oxidiser. Above their stages was a large storage module and above that there were men.

The needle ship stood tall and slim. Within its upper module stood silver clad men who observed the blackened area around them and awaited the arrival of the primitives they knew would come.

Their infrared sensors had told of a relatively large concentration of humans in this area. Now that the radioactivity was dying down the spacers could start to

come down from their closed hydroponic environments and make contact with the survivors.

The small furry animal that looked like a rabbit yet was something else, started from the thorn thicket and sprinted across the frozen ground. Laughing quietly one of the archers casually loosed his arrow. The changed one screamed and skidded across the snow. Some warriors broke ranks briefly to retrieve the prize. Ragnar shouted his congratulations to the archer but the catch was not worth much. It was thin and scrawny. Perhaps it might make a stew. It certainly was not much meat.

The men trudged on against the wind, and up the rise.

The profile of the ship broke the horizon.

The vanguard dropped back quickly. The archers fell into position quietly behind the crest of the ridge and turned expectantly to Ragnar.

Silently he gave the signal. There was a flurry of movement as each flanking party moved out swiftly, each a tortoise of shields.

Then Ragnar stood out against the sky. A thin line of skirmishers ran out down the slope. The squads stepped forth and bristled like porcupines with bows and javelins. Clouds of arrows arched across the sky. Throwers ran out and a flurry of javelins followed them. They blackened the pale sun, and struck the force field.

Impetus lost, the bedraggled arrows fell to the ground.

The skirmishers stopped and stood beneath the shadow of the spaceship. Harmless javelins rained among them.

Vladimir was watching at the viewscreen. He smiled as he watched the bewilderment of the savages. Those in the foreground stood aimless like puzzled dogs. Three warriors, one carrying a raven banner, were conferring on the hill. The squads of archers stood awaiting orders behind their wall of shields.

The tallest of the three warriors stepped forth and motioned the party behind him to follow. They were obviously leaders, perhaps aristocrats, and the gilt decoration of their weapons was very fine.

'Iron age level culture,' he said to those behind him.

'Tribal of feudal level?'

'Semi-feudal from the size of their forces.'

One of the squads of archers stirred and moved out after their leaders. Their short laminated bows and slender deadly lances were held ready.

The leader stopped before the force field and spoke.

'Are you of the Aesir or are you of man?'

'He speaks English but in a degenerated form.'

'Surprising! The culture seems of Scandinavian derivation.'

'No not really surprising. English became the standard form in the Western Bloc before it. I'd better go down and speak with him.'

'Keep the field up. I'll speak to him from behind it.'

The men muttered, milling around restlessly. Ragnar stood aware of their impatience yet firm in his challenge to the needle-thing.



'I am Ragnar Dragonsbane, warlord.'

'I am Vladimir Sokolov.'

The ingrained suspicion of the aristocrats was difficult to overcome but when Gods return they must be obeyed.

'I still think they might be men. The Gods died at Ragnarok,' said the shaman quietly.

'Could men stop the flight of the arrow or the dip of a lance,' replied Ragnar.

Ottar remained unconvinced.

The benches were padded. The warriors were quiet whilst the long-sleeved silver-clad Aesir strapped them down.

Then the gods went and the warriors were left with their thoughts.

Then there was a dull roar and a force. The warriors started with fear but the straps restrained them.

The force tugged at every part of their bodies for an eternity.

But eternity was over and they floated free in their places and were sickly free of pressure.

Then pressure was back again briefly and they were thrown back into cushion.

Then they floated again and globules of vomit swam around them.

One of the silver-clad returned and as he swept past caught up the larger globs with a vacuum mechanism. He smiled at the startled primitives and left.

Then there was a voice without body. It came from the walls and hung in the air.

'You are now in an orbit above the world as you know it. That means you out in space. There is no air in space, nothing to breathe, and either no heat or too much. The weird sensation you will be feeling now is free fall. Before you on the vision screen you will see earth, your world.'

It hung in black sky, immense, with misty mountains, shrouded seas and brown plains. There was the swirl of clouds and the veil of air. It was pastel, muted and magnificent.

Sweat leapt out on the face of Ragnar. Eric was paralyzed by the horrible beauty. Earth shrank slowly.

It was blue, banded with darkness and brown, and round. Round!!

Ragnar in fear drew his dirk and threw it, trying to break that liar of a vision screen. It would not shatter.

'We're going up,' Ottar groaned. 'Up and out.'

'Within a few moments the ship will decelerate—slow down—and minor course adjustments will be initiated,' the voice said, 'and five minutes after the deceleration we will approach the space station.'

The vision screen blackened and as that happened they were pulled deep into the padding again and tugged ruthlessly from side to side. After a moment the shifting weight vanished, and they lay there.

Then there was a gentle knock and a nudge as the ship docked.

Ottar was the first released and as he swam angrily

through the air-lock his cloak swirled behind him like great wings.

Vladimir manoeuvred skilfully down the corridor, checked himself on the handholds and with calm sureness lowered himself onto a ladder, positioned himself ready for weight and started to climb toward the rim. The grey denim overalls were a welcome change after the restrictiveness of the shipsuits. The barbarians behind him were awed by his serenity. In their awkwardness they were amazed at his capacity to handle the weightless condition. He floated through the air as if it were the most natural method of locomotion imaginable.

As they climbed cautiously down the ladder weight slowly returned. They breathed a sigh of infinite relief. Vladimir smiled at their naivete.

He saw to it that they were settled in their quarters and went to see to his other duties.

He was glad to be free of those barbarians. They stunk!!

Ottar sat on the soft bedding, polished his dirk and brooded. He alone knew any science and the cheap tricks of the silver-clad did not impress him. The others had been ignorant and he had kept power over them.

The walls were smooth and plastic. Light diffused from them evenly and smoothly, a milky-white nimbus.

'How do we survive? How do we get the wealth to mount our expeditions into deep space, to the many worlds of this system? It is energy which is wealth and with our technology energy is virtually free,' Vladimir had said.

'But wealth, like all else, like science or technology or knowledge, is neither good nor evil. The good or the evil rests in those men who use it. On earth it was used to destroy. You are the result of that destruction and of that evil. But that does not make nuclear power intrinsically evil. In space we use it to move onward and outward, as man must do to be man, respecting all life and particularly respecting all possible thinking life, although other than man we have found none yet. That is what we live by.'

Ottar polished his dirk until it was sharp and deadly, and sneered.

'All intelligences are brothers,' Vladimir had said.

The silver-clad taught. They taught of physics and chemistry and astronomy. They taught of action and an equal and opposite reaction. They taught of truth and light and philosophy. They taught of the darkness in men's hearts and of the radiation that seeped across the earth.

And the barbarians sat obediently, adored the silver-clad gods quietly and listened to none of it.

Inertia! Ha!

It is obvious that something could not be kept moving unless someone pulled or pushed it all the time. You only have to look at a man drawing a sled to understand that. Newton must have been soft.

Slowly their respect for the silver-clad seeped away. These were not the Gods of the old sagas. And slowly they began to listen to Ottar in the darkness.

The long sleeves of the denim coveralls were ideal for concealing dirks.

Vladimir had seen a movement, he was sure of that, a flicker of motion that had drawn his eye toward the reactor compartment. His decision to investigate was prompted as much by boredom as by curiosity or duty. He was bored with the wheel and was eager for the next mission to the jovian moons.

He entered the section and gaped at the group of mail-clad warriors. The nearest casually thrust his lance through Vladimir's calf, twisted the barbed point in the wound and dragged him in.

'See the glory of the God that bleeds. These are no gods. These are men!'

A shock of red pain struck Vladimir as he tried to reach his radio. A dirk through his wrist pinioned that arm. Another dirk pierced the other palm.

Dazed with shock and crucified, Vladimir opened his mouth to cry out. A short saber was thrust between his teeth, deep into the roof of his mouth and then through the roof of his mind.

His leg jerked as he died.

The warriors gazed down upon him silently but with complete lack of interest.

Murder, howling whistling death. There was the twang of released bowstrings and arrows poured in a stream from the torrent of darkness.

The barbarians hit once and were gone, sweeping close to the rim. Men died and the breath rattled in their throats as they dropped.

A siren howled. An arrow tore into its gaping mouth. It rattled and moaned to silence.

'Laserifles, laserifles!' the commander screamed in wild anger. His voice was drowned as he disappeared beneath the surge and thrust of twisted figures.

The endless waves overwhelmed, and destroyed.

When Ottar finished he stood triumphant with his naked sword red in his gory hand. And when he was finished, Ragnar lay among the dead.

Once the blood-lust seeped from the warrior, curiosity crept in to replace it. There was a set of strange dials and indecipherable runes, on the wall of this strange compartment:

*Air Lock Controls—Unauthorised Personnel  
Keep Out*

Like an ape he was curious. He twisted a dial experimentally.

A God-like force swept him into blackness. His blood boiled away into the vacuum. Explosive decompression had spewed its contents in crystal clouds of frozen blood and oxygen. Within moments the wheel hung lifeless in the void.

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## THE MERIT AWARD

Each issue, VISION OF TOMORROW will pay to the author of the leading story in the issue, as determined by the reader's votes, a bonus in addition to our regular rate. In this way, we will reward authors of outstanding stories, and provide extra incentive to create better fiction for our readers.

After you have read the stories in this issue, fill in the coupon alongside. Number the stories in the order in which you place them, from 1 to 8. The results will be announced in a later issue. The reader whose voting most nearly parallels the final result, and who writes the best letter of 20 words or longer on why he or she selected the first place story for that position will also be awarded a cash prize of £2 2s. 0d.

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In my opinion the stories in this issue rank as follows:

NO. HERE

- .....AFTER RAGNAROK by Robert Bowden  
.....TECHNICAL WIZARD by Philip E. High  
.....DINNER OF HERBS by Douglas R. Mason  
.....LIFE OF THE PARTY by William F. Temple  
.....ONE OF THE FAMILY by Sydney J. Bounds  
.....ON GREAT GRANDFATHER'S KNEE by  
Jack Wodhams  
.....FLANAGAN'S LAW by Dan Morgan  
.....INCUBATION by Damien Broderick

Name .....

Address .....

.....  
.....

# Tomorrow's Disasters

Comment by Christopher Priest

The layer of technology that protects man from himself grows ever more thin. It takes only a blown fuse in some relay-station to black out the entire north-east of the United States. A maniac with a telescopically-sighted rifle can pick off a dozen random victims before the police bust his head. A broken lift in a skyscraper can isolate two hundred people from civilisation. A dustmen's strike in London brings, in less than three weeks, roadside refuse-tips, typhoid scares, and rats in the streets. And as the technological revolution accelerates around us, our culture becomes more sophisticated, more complex, and more potentially capable of self-destruction than ever before.

This is the theme of *Three For Tomorrow* (Meredith Press, New York), and in his introduction to it Arthur C. Clarke sees the environmental mess as perhaps the greatest future menace to which we must adapt.

The idea was given to three top working sf-writers, and their individual treatments of it make up the substance of the book. Superficially, it might seem that this would have led to stereotyped results, but in practice each of the authors has approached the idea from a different angle.

In *How It Was When The Past Went Away*, Robert Silverberg examines the random, unstoppable catastrophe created by a random, undetectable maniac-factor: someone throws an amnesiac (memory-destroying) drug into San Francisco's water-supply. In fact, nothing really drastic happens, and everyone actually comes out of it a little better off, but the appeal of the story is the way in which Silverberg has told the story through central characters whose involvement with memory is crucial.

Roger Zelazny is more concerned with man's short-sightedness, and in *The Eve of RUMOKO* his hero is a (literally) free agent employed to run in whoever it is that is sabotaging the efforts to raise the level of the sea floor. After a few routine gun-pointings and tortures, he finds he's operating from the wrong side after all, and therein lies the moral. The merit of this story is not its plot, which is ordinary in the extreme, but in its background.

Finally, James Blish's theme in *We All Die Naked* is that the technological side-effects are accumulating faster than technology itself can deal with them, and that the end is already to hand. He pictures a remarkably realistic New York polluted by indestructible garbage, which is on the point of literal collapse. Gloomy it may be, but surprisingly funny too.

And ironically it is that the whole of this gloomy book is fun. Surely this is a part of the justification for science fiction? That it can take itself seriously by treating on ideas of terrifying plausibility, yet retain its function as a medium of entertainment?

Meanwhile—watch this book. It's my bet it contains at least one Nebula- or Hugo-winner.



## STELLAR RADIANCE

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